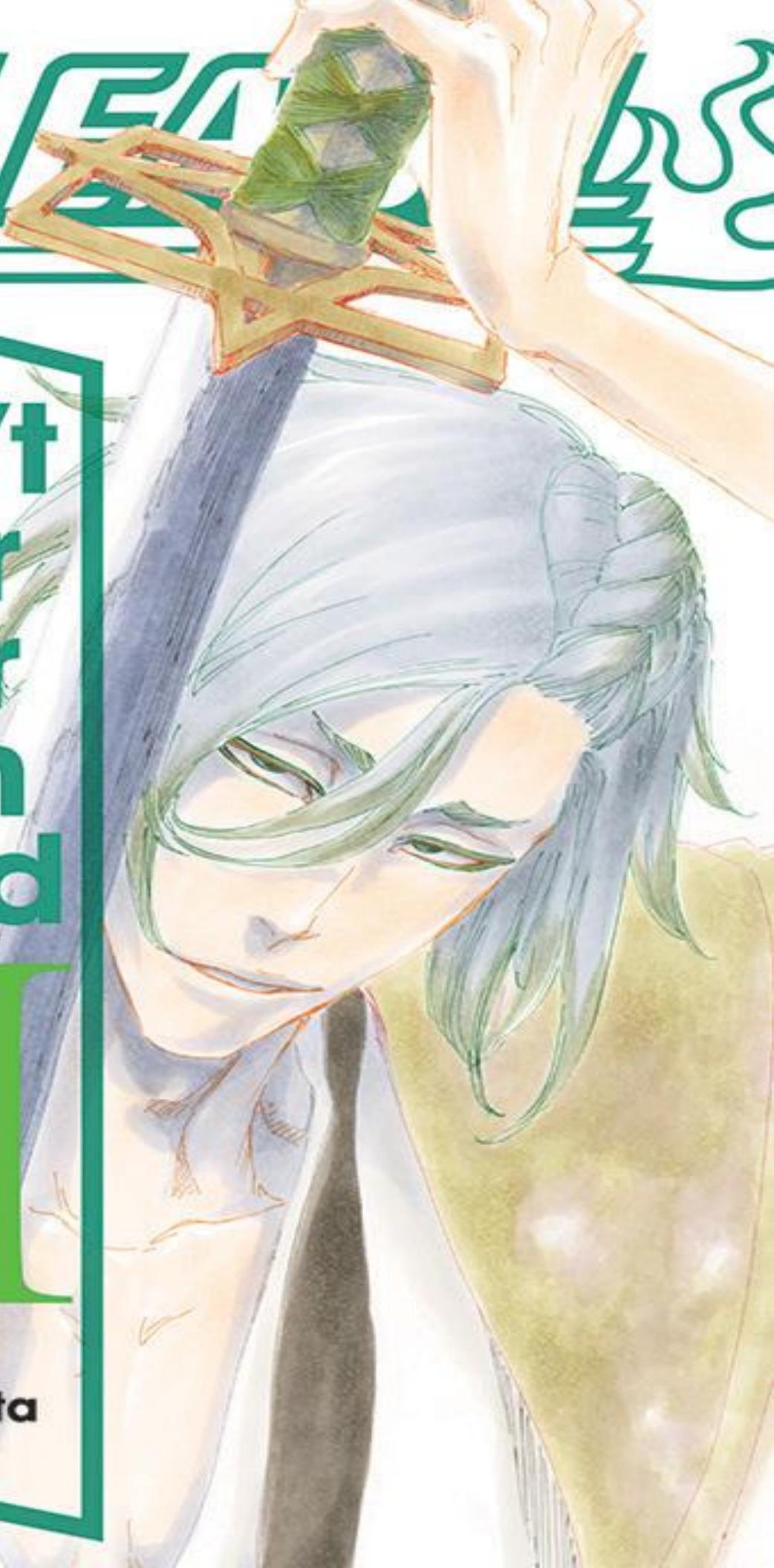


BLEACH

Can't Fear Your Own World

III

Tite Kubo
Ryohgo Narita



BLEACH

Can't Fear Your Own World

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SHUHEI HISAGI

Assistant captain of Ninth Company. Editor-in-chief of the *Seireitei Bulletin*. His interests include guitars and motorcycles from the world of the living.



Kisuke Urahara

The former captain of the Twelfth Company and founding chief of the Department of Research and Development. He provides Ichigo and the others with transcendental engineering ideas.



Shunsui Kyoraku

He succeeded Genryusai Yamamoto as Captain General of the Thirteen Court Guard Companies. He has been friends with Ukitake since they were at Shinoreijutsuin Academy together.



Nanao Ise

Assistant captain of the First Company. She has constantly been at Kyoraku's side as his second-in-command since her days in the Eighth Company.



Mayuri Kurotsuchi

Captain of the Twelfth Company and chief of the Department of Research and Development. A mad scientist whose internal observations and research continue even in the midst of battle.



Kenpachi Zaraki

Eleventh Company captain. His title, Kenpachi, befits him, as he is the strongest Soul Reaper.

Ikkaku Madarame

A tough guy from the Eleventh Company. Pledges to fight and die under Kenpachi. Can actually do bankai.



Yumichika Ayasegawa

Part of the Eleventh Company. A narcissist who loves beautiful things. Hides his zanpaku-to's power.



MAIN CHARACTERS



Tier Halibel

An Arrancar and the third Espada. She took over governing Hueco Mundo after Aizen left.



Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck

An Arrancar. She lost her memories and powers but regained them after meeting Ichigo Kurosaki.



Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez

An Arrancar. He developed an obsession when he was an Espada after losing a fight to Ichigo Kurosaki and wants to settle things.



Sosuke Aizen

Former captain of Fifth Company. He betrayed the Soul Society and engaged in a war against the Thirteen Court Guard Companies. Currently imprisoned in Mugen.



Kaname Tosen

Former captain of Ninth Company. He sided with Aizen to betray the Soul Society because a close friend of his was killed by a Soul Reaper.



Kugo Ginjo

A Fullbringer and the first deputy Soul Reaper. He led the Xcution group and fought against Ichigo and his team but was defeated and died.



Shukuro Tsukishima

A Fullbringer and member of Xcution. He tormented Ichigo with his powers to alter the past.



Giriko Kutsuzawa

A Fullbringer and member of Xcution. He can manipulate time constraints.

Aura Michibane

A mysterious woman who introduces herself as a representative of the religious group Xcution, which shares the name of the Fullbringer group Ginjo created. She attempts to contact Yukio.



Yukio Hans Vorarlberna

A Fullbringer and member of Xcution. He stole an immense fortune from his father and now runs a large corporation.



Shinji Hirako

Captain of the Fifth Company. He has an aloof personality but a quick mind. He led the Visoreds to battle Aizen.



Kensei Muguruma

Captain of Ninth Company. He was Hollowfied during Aizen's treachery. He was reinstated to his position after fighting against Aizen as a Visored.



Yoruichi Shihoin

Formerly the head of the Shihoin family, she was driven out of her position due to Aizen's scheme. Her nickname is the Flash Master.



Dordoni Alessandro Del Socaccio

An Arrancar. A Privaron Espada. He lost to Ichigo but was resurrected as a zombie by Mayuri for the fight against the Vandenreich.



Cirucci Sanderwicci

An Arrancar. A Privaron Espada. She was defeated by Uryu in the battle in Hueco Mundo but, like Dordoni, was resurrected as a zombie.



Luppi Antenor

An Arrancar. The former sixth Espada. Though he died after Grimmjow attacked him, blowing away the upper part of his body, he is brought back to life as a zombie.



Charlotte Chuhlhourne

An Arrancar. Even after being turned into a zombie by Mayuri, she still has absolute confidence in her own beauty.



Lillotto Lamperd

A Quincy. Her beautiful appearance hides a wicked tongue. She survived Auswählen but was defeated in the battle against Yhwach.



Meninas McAllon

A Quincy. She possesses superhuman strength. It was thought she'd been rendered incapable of battle by Liltotto, however...



Giselle Gewelle

A Quincy, also known as Gigi. Anyone covered by Giselle's blood turns into a zombie. Looks like a girl, but...



Candice Catnip

A Quincy. Uses lightning as a weapon. Her whereabouts are uncertain after the Auswählen.



Bambietta Basterbine

A Quincy. A member of the Stern Ritter who was defeated while battling Komamura. Turned into a zombie by Gigi.



NaNaNa Najahkoop

A Quincy. The power of his Schrift immobilized Aizen, though only temporarily.



Tokinada Tsunayashiro

A member of the Four Great Noble Clans. Part of the Tsunayashiro family.



Hikone

A beautiful child who follows Tokinada.



Ichigo Kurosaki

The main character of the original story.





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ブリーチ

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III

Tite Kubo
Ryohgo Narita

VIZ MEDIA

SHONEN
JUMP

THAT
IS
WHY
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HAVE
A
NAME
FOR
WALKING
THE
PATH
OF
FEAR.

—Sosuke Aizen

INTERLUDE

HIKONE UBUGINU DID NOT REMEMBER the moment that their sense of self germinated.

That didn't quite mean that they had no memories of their time as an infant, in the way that an ordinary Soul Reaper and human would not. The konpaku called Hikone was a warped form created by layering and interleaving the splinters of many different beings. Inside their konpaku were Hollows from millennia ago, freshy dead Quincies, and even miscarriages collected from the world of the living. The konpaku was a compilation of every possible kind of soul with the Fragments of the Reio at its center. Normally, a being such as Hikone would promptly fall apart and lose form. However, because they contained the Fragments of the Reio that the Tsunayashiro family had gathered, Hikone was miraculously able to continue life as a konpaku with a single sense of individuality.

Though Hikone clearly remembered the moment when they had been given the name Hikone and their consciousness had awakened, they were seized by the fantasy that they had a sense of self that reached much further into the past than that.

Or perhaps that was not a fantasy.

After all, the building blocks used to create Hikone were konpaku prior to their decomposition into reishi. It was quite possible that what could be called the dregs of those prior beings influenced Hikone to some extent.

It was the sensation of dozens, hundreds of different selves intermingling within them.

Because they were such an aggregation, there was nothing but chaos that approached nihility.

An accumulation of emotions floated up and disappeared within them.

A certain fragment of soul would forgive slaughter, while another would reject it as absolutely impermissible.

A certain fragment of soul would claim that evil itself was the essence of humanity, while another would extol virtue as the true embodiment of humankind.

Though their individual rationales and memories had vanished, the differences in the *ways of life* etched into those konpaku entangled and, at times, threatened to tear Hikone's soul apart in their rejection of each other.

Because of that, the individual called Hikone found peace in the instruction that the individual called Tokinada granted them. Tokinada would point out what was definitively "righteous" for the ever lost and perplexed Hikone, which would herd the dregs of konpaku rampaging within the child's head in a single direction.

Hikone's one and only desire, that they themselves had come up with, was to become a "good king." For Tokinada's sake—because the Soul Reaper said he would make them king—they would strive to become a leader beloved by the people.

Tokinada had taught Hikone that in order to become king, occasional violence or slaughter was a necessity. And though Hikone had accepted that, a "Hikone-ness" had begun to steadily germinate within them from other pieces of themselves.

What it would become would divide Hikone's fate...

However, to Hikone, currently a follower of Tokinada, that was still irrelevant.

And at this moment it still was not.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“IT’S JUST THAT YOU HAVEN’T SEEN THE STARS YET.”

When she learned of Tokinada’s true nature, his wife was not shocked or disappointed, but simply replied with the above as though admonishing a small child. The pure love filling her voice did not give him the impression that the words were calculated or had been uttered as flattery toward a high-ranking noble.

And that was something Tokinada could not forgive.

It gave him the sense of someone in a place far higher than himself, looking down upon him as though he were in the position of a supplicant.

His position being in the lowest seat of a branch family, Tokinada Tsunayashiro had taken a woman named Kakyo as his wife at the behest of the head family. Kakyo was a woman the Tsunayashiro family had found by chance, and one who held a secret attainment in the depths of her konpaku.

The Tsunayashiro family’s “watchers” had spied her when she arrived to take the entrance exam to become a Soul Reaper.

At the time, the Tsunayashiro family had been searching for those with that attainment. They would deplete such beings through various experiments and then extract fragments of what would become those attainments from the shadows of what the beings once were.

Then the family had begun to ponder.

If one who had the desired attainment bore a child, would that attainment be inherited and fully transferred to the child? Would it weaken, or was it nontransferable, or, possibly, would it multiply in the way that the birth of a child multiplied humanity?

Though they were fixated on their interest in bringing this attainment into the Tsunayashiro family, the woman they noticed was one of the impoverished class of residents of the Rukongai that they scorned. Therefore the Tsunayashiro’s leaders decided to use one of the lowest branches of the family for their experiment. Even

as part of the same Tsunayashiro clan—or rather, *because* they were the head of the Four Great Noble Clans, which demarcated the world based on social position—there was a clear pecking order within the family.

Tokinada approached the woman, feigning that his bluster had attracted him to her, just as he had been directed to by the main family. Though he was displeased that the main family controlled him to the extent of instructing him to marry her, that displeasure was overtaken by Tokinada's desire to see the face of the powerless woman the moment she fell from the peak of happiness to the pits of hell. What would her face look like in the moment when she could no longer retreat and he thrust the truth before her—when he would say to her, "*I don't love you. You were simply chosen as an experimental subject by the Tsunayashiro family?*"

Fantasizing about that moment, Tokinada was tantalized with sadistic curiosity by the pitiful lamb that was that woman.

Then, using feigned love and his own social position as weapons, he easily captured the woman's heart.

Or so he thought.

The night of the wedding ceremony, Tokinada had laid everything bare.

"If you annul the wedding now, it won't just affect you. Those living in the Rukongai where you come from would likely be blamed and punished. Your best friend Kaname, whom you talk about so often, won't escape unscathed either," he had pressed.

As he turned to look at her, Tokinada's eyes were overflowing with expectation, wondering just what kind of comical expression of despair would show on her face. But his longing was quickly thwarted.

The woman named Kakyo had already seen through it all.

She told him that she had married him despite that. Or perhaps she had guessed that the moment she turned him down, blame would have fallen even upon the friend she had left in her

hometown. Yet after all this time, he still could not see into her mind to know which it was— such forms of thought were incomprehensible to Tokinada.

While Tokinada was bewildered and irritated, Kakyo was starting to gain influence as a Soul Reaper. It was rumored she was certain to become a seated officer in the future. Even Tokinada's classmates from his institute years, such as Ukitake and Kyoraku, knew her true abilities at a glance.

At this rate, she would usurp everything.

His very self would erode away.

Though Tokinada felt restless, the main family would not allow him to kill Kakyo or divorce her. To the main family, Kakyo was a valuable experimental subject and Tokinada was nothing more than a tool they had prepared in order to perform their analysis of her.

However, for better or worse for Tokinada, someone discovered the Tsunayashiro's schemes by chance. This person was a Soul Reaper who had risen from the commoners and who, in public, Tokinada associated with as a close friend. This person was also close to Kakyo and might have even harbored feelings for her.

Attempting to save Kakyo from the Tsunayashiro clan, he had called Tokinada out late one night and questioned the aristocrat's true motives.

Tokinada happily told him the truth, including the fact that he did not love Kakyo in the slightest. He might have been able to follow his family's orders by pretending to love his wife. However, Tokinada's innate character did not allow him to do that.

Ultimately, Tokinada wanted to see it—he wanted to see the man's reaction upon realizing his friend was nothing more than a fiend. As Tokinada had expected, with despair on his face, the man said to Tokinada, "As your friend, I will kill you."

Still smiling, Tokinada had drawn his zanpaku-to.

They matched each other in power, and it wouldn't have been unexpected for either of them to defeat the other. After the clashing

blades met countless times, something neither of them had anticipated occurred.

She might have been anxious because Tokinada had left the house in the middle of the night and hadn't returned. Kakyo, who had come in search of her husband, appeared at the scene after hearing the clash of blades.

Coming between their match to the death, Kakyo attempted to stop their swords. In that moment, Tokinada watched for her to turn her back to him and simply *thrust Kakyo's body at his opponent*.

There was no way for the wounded Soul Reaper to avoid her, and so his friend and wife tangled into each other and staggered.

Then, without hesitation, Tokinada cut through both Kakyo and his enemy Soul Reaper.

Tokinada was thrilled. He was even smiling faintly.

His joy was not a result of having extended his life. He smiled because, though the course of events were unanticipated, he had given his wife, who had devoted herself to a sanctimonious philosophy, despair.

Now—cry, fear, despair. If you are going to burn out the last of your life, then turn the Suzumushi blade you carry against me. You may curse your own naïveté as you strike me with your murderous malice!

Wearing the look of a child stomping on a half-dead bug, he gazed upon Kakyo's face as she passed. However, even on the brink of death, she smiled faintly as she choked out her final words, her expression appearing as though she were admonishing a child.

"I'm sorry... I...wasn't able to clear away the clouds for you..."

Then she simply closed her eyes.

He was in a daze for some time with the two bodies in front of him; then Tokinada's body trembled. He shivered not from regret that he had killed his wife, who had attempted to save him even in her very last moments, but from *unadulterated rage*.

"You...you looked down upon me—pitied me—until your very last moment! You say I have simply not seen the stars? You say that you

could not clear my clouds? Don't speak absurdities—don't utter such foolishness, Kakyo! I have been standing on top of the clouds from the very beginning! No, I am the cloud! You were the one who was mistaken! That the stars—that this world—is beautiful...is a gravely mistaken view! Why have you not noticed the unsightliness of the star crud attempting to glisten in the darkness? Your current state is the result of your belief that all would be fine if it was right!"

Tokinada continued to yell as he kicked not the body of his wife, but his already departed best friend. Eventually he steadied his breathing, his shoulders heaving as he did, and the rage disappeared from his face.

"...Too bad, Kakyo. I wanted to more thoroughly show you exactly how absurd the world is. I wanted to teach you that the justice your peace-loving heart treasured was a wish in vain. Had I been able to remake you into evil, at that time I could have truly opened my heart to you... Ah, in that sense, I might have actually loved you."

Another thin smile spread over his face. Had Tokinada's words reached Kakyo's ears?

At this point, now that Kakyo's life was lost, no one could know the answer.

Immediately after that, the Tsunayashiro family members summoned Tokinada to appear before the main family.



Tokinada readily and bluntly replied to his family's interrogation.
"I just could not stand being the husband of a slum dweller from the Rukongai."

Though the main family branded him as incompetent, they reluctantly accepted his claim. As aristocrats, they were the types who would conclude unquestioningly that it was a disgrace to take one of the poorer classes as a wife.

But Tokinada had lied to his family about one thing.

It was no small lie.

Tokinada did not care whether his partner was from the Rukongai at all. Because, regardless of whether someone was from the Four Great Noble Clans or a commoner—in fact, regardless of whether they were even his own parents—he saw all people equally, as nothing more than playthings for him to toy with.

Although he had been raised in an atmosphere in which it was natural to consider the lower and middle-ranked aristocrats poor and insignificant, it could be said that Tokinada stood out as particularly unscrupulous even within his own family.

"My wife committed adultery with a man who had been my friend, and I caught them in the act. In a rage, the man killed Kakyo, and so I reluctantly struck back."

Having the backing of the Tsunayashiro family, which did not want a criminal among their number, Tokinada shamelessly excused himself in that way. It was very likely that as part of the Four Great Noble Clans, a member of the Tsunayashiro family wouldn't even have to go to trial after making such a claim. However, this time, the circumstances were somewhat different.

A man who had been on the lookout for Tokinada's deceptions appeared, touting a minuscule amount of evidence. Normally, Tokinada would have been able to make such evidence and testimony disappear, but the fact that the man was the second son of a highly influential upper-ranked aristocrat was Tokinada's misfortune.

Shunsui Kyoraku—if only he had not been around, Tokinada Tsunayashiro might have walked a different path.

≡

PALACE FOREFRONT

After arriving beneath the “castle in the air,” Kyoraku’s first reaction was to once again narrow his eyes at its magnitude.

“You got me. Kyogoku or not, it’s preposterous the Four Great Noble Clans could build this thing under everyone’s noses.”

“I doubt this was built using any hired labor. I wonder if it’s floating in the air using the same trick as the Reiokyū.”

“The Reiokyū utilizes a hidden technique, if I’m not mistaken...”

Kyoraku shook his head as though he were exasperated in reply to Yoruichi’s analysis. Then he turned his eyes to the palace directly under the gigantic castle in the air. Though it was sensible compared to the floating building, when Kyoraku looked at the structure, which was still larger than the Court Guard’s First Company barracks, he quietly honed his spiritual pressure. He did so because he felt a familiar spiritual pressure from within that palace.

“So he doesn’t even intend to hide? I suppose that means he’s already finished preparing to meet our attack.”

Kyoraku, still at the forefront, headed to the gate. As he did so, he glanced at Kenpachi and said, “Sorry, Captain Zaraki. I think this will eventually end in a fight, but would you let me do some talking first?”

“Hm? If we’re going to fight anyway, jabbering’s just a waste of time.”

“That is true, but there are protocols to be followed. If we headed right in slashing at him, that act itself would make us traitors. Depending on the situation, we might even end up making an enemy out of the entire Soul Society.”

Kenpachi wore a villainous smile as he replied. “Cut the crap. You called me here because you know I couldn’t care less about finicky

details like that. Having the Soul Society as an enemy? Ain't that great? That's not a problem at all."

"But even so... The reason I had you wear your captain's coat was because that would at least make it reasonable for you to confront the Four Great Noble Clans. Though I wouldn't fuss as much about Yoruichi, since she is also a member of the clans herself."

"I think it'd be an issue for me if you *were* fussing over me, but saying so bluntly that you don't care is odd too," Yoruichi said in a teasing tone and then brought up the name of someone who wasn't present. "It's too bad that kid Byakuya isn't here. If there were a chance we'd be able to legitimately kill Tokinada, I would've liked to let that kid have it."

"Did something happen?"

"Of all things...he insulted Byakuya's wife Hisana to his face. The kid looked calm on the surface, but he may well have been seething in the pit of his stomach."

"I'm grateful for his mettle. Had he drawn his sword then, that itself could have resulted in a civil war."

Imagining the events of that time, Kyoraku let out a small sigh.

Byakuya Kuchiki was presently not in the Seireitei. He had left with Hitsugaya and the others from the Twelfth Company under the guise of an investigation in relation to some trouble Ichigo Kurosaki was having in a certain place within the world of the living.

Though Kyoraku had no intention of calling Ichigo Kurosaki to this place, no matter what route they took, if that trouble were part of Tokinada's scheme, then their opponent had done an exquisite job of dividing up the Court Guard's firepower.

While Kyoraku was thinking that over, they reached the center of the courtyard.

The man who had appeared high up in the palace, as though he were standing on a balcony, spoke to them directly.

"You're late, Kyoraku."

"...Tokinada."

"Oh, not even a *Lord*? Then should I consider this not a visit from the Captain General of the Thirteen Court Guard Companies but a personal call from an old school friend?"

"I suppose that's right." In response to Tokinada's provocative question, Kyoraku put on a thin, sarcastic smile that didn't reveal his thoughts. "I've come here to stop you—as an old friend."

Before anyone realized it, Kyoraku had already drawn his zanpaku-to. Because he had a second blade that had been created solely to protect the Ise family's Hakkyoken, the Katen Kyokotsu was known as an incredibly rare zanpaku-to making up a set.

While still prepared for a surprise attack, Kyoraku only momentarily glanced at the castle in the air as he inquired, "I suppose I'll at least ask you. What are you intending to do by transporting that thing to the world of the living?"

"Ah, I should have known you'd at least realize that much. Of course. You've already exposed my lies and subjected me to a trial once."

"I lost that battle the moment you didn't receive an appropriate charge. How regrettable..."

"So you came with that mob in tow to play revolution and exact your revenge? Really, you never change. Just as in the past, you make others think you're deeply prudent, yet you have a penchant for letting your emotions rule. Just as when you turned your back on Central 46 in order to save Rukia Kuchiki, this time you are turning on the Four Great Noble Clans... No, I suppose you're turning on the Soul Society's history itself."

As Tokinada spoke gleefully, Kyoraku shook his head.

"I'm defying history? I give up—how exactly did you come to that conclusion?"

"The Tsunayashiro are the symbol that rules history. The Tsunayashiro family's every move continues to form the foundation of the world. In short, don't you think the moment you defy me as

the head of the family, you are committing high treason against history itself?"

"That depends on the history that you're trying to put together. According to Yoruichi, it seems that you're not just trying to govern over the Seireitei, but also the world of the living and Hueco Mundo, aren't you? What is the purpose of doing that now, of all times?"

Tokinada's smile quickly slipped off his face as he replied, "Don't you think the three worlds as they are now...lack respect?"

"Respect?"

"That's right. Just who made it so that those residing in the world of the living could exist through uncountable nights and be showered in the light of daybreak? Whose benevolence enables a ceaseless supply of reishi sand to fall upon Hueco Mundo?"

Tokinada feigned vigor by shaking his fist as his oration continued. "This applies to the matter of the earlier war as well. The only ones who know of Ichigo Kurosaki's deeds are the Soul Reapers of the Soul Society. The humans of the world of the living are great only in their number and do not even know that their world was almost in ruin. Do you think it is right to allow such a situation to continue?"

At that point, Nelliell Tu Odelschwanck chimed in. "You can't say that when you don't even know the first thing about Ichigo. He's not the type of person to let such things bother him."

"Oh, Ms. Arrancar, is it fine just because he himself doesn't mind? Are you suggesting it is right for the humans of the world of the living to continue with their carefree lives, letting slip idle complaints when faced with trivial predicaments and living out their depraved days, unaware that they have been blessed with the privilege of being *allowed* to live?"

"You're free to think that. But don't use Ichigo to explain your own selfish reasoning."

Observing this conversation, Liltotto Lamperd asked Grimmjow, who was standing next to her, "Hey, is that Arrancar Ichigo Kurosaki's girl or something?"

"Hunh? No chance in hell. Kurosaki's mate is a human woman who's more happy-go-lucky."

The person that came to Grimmjow's mind was the woman Ichigo had risked his life coming to Hueco Mundo to save.

Disregarding Grimmjow, and recalling the girl who had healed his arm, Liltotto remarked indifferently, "I see, so that prick is a womanizer."

Meanwhile, Tokinada responded to Nelli with a serious, unsmiling expression. "How rude of me. However, the truth is that I am simply showing my gratitude toward Ichigo Kurosaki. Had he not defeated Yhwach, the boundaries between the three worlds would have disappeared and we would have *returned* to a universe in which there would be no cycling of konpaku, wouldn't we? Such an action would have reduced the Soul Society's history to naught. I would like to make this a universe where he receives commendation befitting his achievement of preventing that occurrence."

Kyoraku, who had been momentarily silent, smiled bitterly as he replied, "Lip service doesn't suit you, Tokinada. Why don't you tell us what you truly want?"

"I am sure I already did, Kyoraku—don't think someone such as the Captain General of the Court Guards can see through me. Do you mean to say you can read my mind?"

"Aye, but not as the Captain General of the Thirteen Court Guard Companies. I see through to your true self as an old friend whose fate is tied to yours whether I like it or not."

Kyoraku readied his two blades as he uttered these words that hit straight at the crux of the matter.

"All you want to do is *see* it, right? You want to see everything that was common sense until now crumble—you want to see the world slowly break."

"..."

"The world of the living is rooted in its own society and religious views. At the current moment they do not even scientifically

acknowledge the existence of konpaku." Kyoraku looked at the many-floored building above his head. "You intend to suspend the greatest 'proof' of Soul Reapers, konpaku, and also reveal Hollows over the world of the living to make their existences public. Those who were religious adherents until now would be in chaos, and more troubling, those who did not believe in the existence of that realm will learn of the existence of the world after death."

If the existence of the world after death were proven, even if the world itself remained unbroken, the society and culture that were contained within it would likely be destroyed.

Those who were unhappy in the world of the living might dream of the world after death as a simpler place and more readily kill themselves. Or, more might flock to crime believing that even if they were to receive capital punishment, they would still have the next world anyway. There was even a possibility that countries using religion as the foundation of their social systems would fall into anarchy after being cut off at their very roots.

"Well, in order to prevent that from happening, that castle in the air and Karakura Town might eventually cease to exist. Even if they can't kill Hollows, the world of the living has mountains of frightful weapons to destroy other humans."

In addition, if they were to learn of the existence of hell, it was likely chaos would arise from other vectors.

What were the criteria for ending up in hell? Would that mean that as long as they didn't meet those criteria, they could commit crimes into oblivion within that scope? In that case, how would the significance of the laws of the living change?

Faced with a shared world justice system that forced itself at them from an entirely novel angle, human society could enter a state in which it could not see a tomorrow.

Though that confusion would likely come to an end after a period of time had passed, how much tragedy would result in the world in the meantime?

Or, alternatively, there was a fear that those who had prepared themselves beforehand for what came after death might arrange to meet and create a new religion within the Rukongai that would spread the chaos even within the Soul Society.

After considering those many dangerous variables, Kyoraku purposefully set his sights not on the *result*, but on the *motivation* for it.

“Though they’re on thin ice, both the world of the living and Hueco Mundo are in balance right now. When I tried to imagine why you would purposefully set that into chaos and reshape the worlds, I could only think of one answer.” At that point, Kyoraku’s cynical smile disappeared, and he uttered the outrageous conclusion he had come to with a serious expression. “*It’s because you want to see it.* You simply want to laugh and watch as the value systems people believe in collapse and fall into chaos—as they fight and self-destruct you will snack on tea cakes and such. You broke unwritten rules and are trying to push a brand-new value system onto the world of the living simply for that reason. Am I wrong?”

The others who were listening to Kyoraku generally looked bewildered.

They couldn’t easily accept his conjecture. Who in the world would believe that a man who had gone to the trouble of committing such dreadful acts would have the ambiguous goal of simply wanting to watch society fall into chaos?

It was likely that only Nanao and Yoruichi, who had had brief encounters with the man’s unscrupulousness, had come to the same conclusion as Kyoraku.

Tokinada’s eyes quickly narrowed as his face once again broke into a thin smile, and he said, “Oh dear, you really are a difficult man, Kyoraku. It looks like you have a thorough understanding of my propensities... At least, you have a better sense of them than the main family that belittled me.”

"Are you saying that you're destroying the ways of the world just to pass the time?"

At Tier Halibel's doubtful words, Tokinada smiled and tilted his head.

"You have the gall to say that, oh, Arrancar queen? You Hollows are beings that are insatiably manipulated by your desires in order to fill the void carved into your konpaku. Some are besmirched by hunger, some are drowning in destruction, some seek companionship to remedy their solitude, some ceaselessly pursue beauty. That is what you are like, is it not?"

Charlotte Chuhlhourne, a member of the Corpse Unit who had been listening, posed and murmured, "Ha ha...you're so naïve. I do pursue beauty, that's for sure...but I've already filled my void. That's because I've already perfected myself! That's right, I exist in beauty...all the way down to my name!"

"..."

Yumichika seemed as though he were about to say something to Chuhlhourne, who was flexing, but he purposefully held his tongue and averted his eyes.

It wasn't clear whether Tokinada had heard Chuhlhourne's monologue, but his gaze remained averted from the Arrancar as he continued to address Halibel. "Or do you mean to say you have lived a straight and narrow life without having made others into your meals?"

"The world requires sacrifices. However, though I used them for nourishment, I had no reason to turn them into playthings."

"No reason? Do you need anything of the sort? To me, toys and nourishment are equal. A life lived simply eating for survival is nothing better than forever dying, is it not? In that case, if they will die either way, then isn't the *healthy and correct way* to live toying with them as much as possible before killing them?"

As Tokinada declared his intentions without a hint of hesitation, most of those around Kyoraku came to a realization.

It was likely *that thing* had rejected its ties to humanity and was certainly a being with whom they could not see eye to eye.

“*Tsk... You scum.*”

Muguruma spat that out while next to him, Kenpachi was searching for their opponents’ spiritual pressures as though he couldn’t care less about the man’s remarks.

Behind him, the assistant captain of the Eleventh Company and the third seat were whispering to each other.

“Hey, Yumichika, you think Captain Kuchiki and Omaeda are actually more like us than the other nobles?”

“That even makes the Shihoin family’s impulsiveness look attractive in comparison. Someone who reveals such ugliness just by speaking is not one to scoff at.”

As Ikkaku Madarame and Yumichika exchanged these comments, the Quincies and Arrancars were also looking up at Tokinada with expressions of exasperation or disgust.

Giselle Gewelle summed things up in a whisper to Candice Catnip. “*So, that guy’s crazy narcissistic, right? Definitely hasn’t got any friends.*” Grimmjow had also started to hone his murderous impulses at the word *mob*.

“Hm, well, don’t you think Luppi’s disposition is the most similar to his?”

“You’re right. You’d probably be able to get along with him pretty great.”

At Dordoni Alessandro Del Socaccio’s and Cirucci Sanderwicci’s words, Luppi glared at the two with an unimpressed expression.

“Hey, you’ve got to be joking, right? Don’t lump me in with that weirdo. I’m not *opposed* to sadistic stuff, but even I wouldn’t indulge in making degeneracy like that into a hobby.”

Tokinada looked them over and shrugged, saying, “Oh well, I expected it from Kyoraku, but I can’t believe the age has come when Arrancars and Quincies would speak of morality. I suppose this is

what you'd say is the end of the world. Well, it was already pretty much over to begin with."

Kyoraku heard those words and stepped forward.

"What's really ending are your schemes. You don't happen to feel like coming in quietly, do you?"

"What crime do you plan to charge me for? Using the Kyogoku as I please is one of the rights of the Tsunayashiro family. If you have suspicions regarding what was in the Visual Department, then I'll kindly ask you to refrain until you have a formal investigation performed by Central 46 and the Gilded Seal Aristocrat Assembly's officials."

"If we did that, we wouldn't make it in time to put a stop to your scheme. I'll kindly ask you to let us press charges that allow us to forcibly take you in."

Hearing Kyoraku's words, Nanao grew dubious as she stood just behind them. When all was said and done, this was an unofficial march, so she wondered if there was any point to questioning whether there had been wrongdoing or not. But Nanao immediately came upon an answer.

Tokinada was the man who was managing the Visual Department.

It was possible this would also be recorded somewhere.

If they let him escape here and Tokinada were to use this record as a basis to gather aristocrats who opposed the Kyoraku family, the situation would be in the Tsunayashiro's favor as it was now.

And in order to make it so that she, Hirako, Muguruma, and the others could consistently demonstrate that they were acting in accordance with "due process," they needed to at least verify there was a crime to charge him with, even if just as a formality.

Then again, since the Arrancars and Quincies had joined them, they could likely expect a ruthless investigation no matter what happened.

"Oh? You think you can sentence me? There are a limited number of charges you could use to arrest one of the Four Great Noble Clans on the spot, so I wonder just what it is you're saying I've done?"

"There *is* one thing you've done. You should know what it is, shouldn't you? It's a crime that resulted even in someone from the main Kuchiki family being arrested without controversy."

"..."

"Hikone Ubuginu. I haven't met this person yet, but don't try to tell me you don't have any recollection."

The smile disappeared from Tokinada's face for a moment.

Then he broke out in another smile, unlike the thin grins he had worn until then—a fiendish, predatory smile—as he muttered, "You mean the 'transfer of a Soul Reaper's powers'?"

To transfer a Soul Reaper's powers to a human was strictly forbidden by the Soul Society's laws.

It was such a taboo that, though it had happened due to Aizen's artifices, Rukia Kuchiki, the adopted daughter of the Four Great Noble Clans, had been arrested with no contest when she had been charged.

"We have retrieved evidence from Shino-Seyakuin. By mixing Soul Reaper konpaku into human konpaku, you were able to compel the Saketsu and Hakusui to function. Regardless of whether it was a corpse or something else, if you have *given Soul Reaper powers to something that was once human*, it could be said that you've stepped firmly into forbidden territory, can't it?"

"Enough with the tomfoolery, Kyoraku. Do you think I am unaware that when Ichigo Kurosaki lost his powers, the Court Guard captains and assistant captains came together to spare him their powers?"

"Well, now. That was authorized by old man Yama, so I'd think of it as a special case. However, I don't remember making such an exception for you. And there's already precedent that it's not

allowed even by the Four Great Noble Clans because of Rukia's case."

At that point Kyoraku boldly smiled as he added shamelessly, "*Though she received the death penalty because of Aizen's tricks.*"

As she listened, Nanao felt his argument was such a terrible fallacy she almost wanted to bow her head. Nevertheless, if that problematic provocation could reveal Tokinada's faults, that in itself could be said to be a worthwhile plan. Or Kyoraku might have just wanted to bring up this "Hikone Ubuginu" person even a moment sooner. In any case, if what he had heard were true, the child's existence itself was proof of Tokinada's illegal activities.

However, Tokinada remained unflustered as he replied, "You seem very calm. Aren't you worried about Shinji Hirako after leaving him all alone in a horde of monsters?"

His words indicated that he had realized what one of those who had come to this place might have done.

However, Kyoraku pulled his hat down slightly and shook his head with a cynical smile. "He's an adult, you know. He can handle a child messenger...or rather the 'playmates' of a child messenger, on his own."

The shadow that Tokinada cast from the balcony drew near Kyoraku's feet.

Then, Kyoraku simply sank *right into* that shadow.

In the next moment, his sword glinted at Tokinada's feet.

≡

The valley of the Kyogoku was a desert covered in rocks. At its center, something was enshrined that seemed unbefitting the devastated atmosphere—a gigantic object like a flower. That thing, which was closed like a bud, eventually quivered in its entirety and, in the middle of the white expanse of earth, bloomed into a magnificent flower wreath.

Then the man who had appeared from within it brusquely spat out, "Looks like it's over. Thanks for your efforts, Sakanade."

It was a beautiful, gigantic pedestal formed in a shape that brought to mind a *Dianthus* flower. That was the form of Hirako's zanpaku-to after reaching bankai.

"I really was just beat when it came to the war with the Quincies." Hirako's voice echoed and resounded within the Kyogoku's stretch of rocks. "Since they sprang up in the Seireitei all of a sudden and sent everything into chaos... If they had just created a defined battle formation outside of the walls, I would have been able to clean up most of them by myself."

He muttered as though complaining to himself. "It's not all that useful when I've got allies around. There isn't even much point to using it when facing someone directly. It only really means something when I'm isolated and standing right in the middle of a gigantic crowd of enemies alone. What a pain."

After sighing, he righted his neck, which had been turned upward, and inquired of the sea that surrounded him, "You all agree on that, don't you?"

What was spread out around Hirako was unilateral *death*. A vast white sea composed of a tremendous number of monstrous corpses. Rather than the raging tidal wave they had been just moments ago, they were calm, almost as though in a lull. The several tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of monsters the swarm had swelled into had all died in a strange way.

They had died by biting each other's stomachs or using their sharp claws to pierce each other—they had expired *killing their own allies*.

It persistently inverted the perception of who was "friend" and who was "foe."

That was the ability of the bankai of Shinji Hirako's Sakanade—Sakashima Yokoshima Hoppo Fusagari.

"Sorry—Sakanade is a liar. That the hypnosis doesn't work well on bugs was also a lie."

If his normal shikai was thought to be only an illusion of sight and sound, using his bankai, he would prod at the underside of others' perceptions, activating a brutal ability to hypnotize not just their sensory systems, but to confound their very minds.



But as brutal as that ability was, it had immense recompense.

Unlike the shikai, because it could not distinguish between friend and foe, if fellow Soul Reapers were around him, they would also begin to unleash friendly fire on him. Because there wouldn't be an object whose perception of friend and foe he could change in a one-on-one match, the ability wouldn't activate. In a sense, that could also be said to be another form of recompense.

Though if I could do that, I could pretend to be their ally and slash them all I want from behind.

He had thought, just for a moment, that perhaps it would have made sense for him to come to this place alone and have Tokinada and Hikone attack each other, but he couldn't rely on them conveniently appearing together.

“Well, if somebody on Aizen or Yhwach’s level comes by, it might not have any effect in the first place.”

Hirako once again sighed and started to slowly walk over the sea of corpses.

He patted Sakanade’s handle as though in appreciation, but his grumble revealed the opposite sentiment.

“Seriously, your shikai is for the strong opponents and your bankai is for sweeping foot soldiers... You really are too contrary.”

≡

“It seems the horde that Ikomikidomoe created has been destroyed,” muttered Aura, who had been probing distant spiritual pressures.

“You’ve sure underestimated me if you think you’ve got time to take your eyes off me.”

At Ginjo’s words, Aura broke into a soft smile.

“No, I’m not underestimating you at all.”

Though there was the mood of a conversation before a fight, in actuality, it had already begun.

Before she could start a discussion, Shukuro Tsukishima had turned his sword at Aura in an attempt to insert his bookmark into

her. Instead, it had simply passed through her as though cutting through air.

Ginjo had also tried waving his sword as a test several times, but no matter how many times he tried to cut her, her body dispersed like smoke that his sword passed right through, so they had lowered their swords for the time being rather than repeating the process in vain.

"Mere physical attacks will not work on my present self... I will at least inform you of that."

"You got me beat. I can't hold a match to that kido stuff." Ginjo shrugged, then simply went on to question her. "Was that stuff about Karakura Town being sealed off one of your ploys?"

Yukio, standing behind her, answered Ginjo's question. "To be more precise, it was a joint effort. She's been maxing out only her *kōnpaku tamashi* and Reishi Subjugation stats. That's why when I activate my abilities through her, her performance is next level. It's like she's got a booster or something in her."

"So it's not from the power we stole from Ichigo, then."

Actually, if she can vaporize her own body, her basic Fullbringer abilities must be monster-level.

Ginjo realized that Aura, who was in front of his eyes, was reaching dangerous territory as a Fullbringer. With the utmost caution, he decided to feel out what her intentions were. "I was putting this off, but I at least have to ask what your goal is, founder of a new faith and possessor of divine looks."

"There's no need for flattery. Actually, my goal will change depending on what it is you seek."

"You mentioned that earlier, didn't you? What I seek? What do you expect from me after I died and wandered until I got to the Rukongai?"

As Ginjo questioned her, Aura had a somewhat serious look in her eyes and she responded with a question of her own. "Are you still contemplating revenge on the Soul Reapers?"

"That's none of your business. Did Yukio tell you about that?"

At Ginjo's question, Yukio shook his head slightly.

"It's the opposite, Kugo. She came to me *because* she knew about your past."

"What did you say...?"

Ginjo seemed dubious, and Aura answered, "Michibane is my mother's family name. My father's name was Tensho Agata."

"What?!"

At that point, the look in Ginjo's eyes clearly changed.

Tsukishima's eyes faintly narrowed as though he also recalled the name.

"I see...so you're that old Agata guy's little girl... Never would have thought both a parent and their kid would end up Fullbringlers."

As Ginjo narrowed his eyes, Aura politely bowed her head.

"I am grateful that you gave my father hope."

"Are you being sarcastic? Your pops ended up dead because I called him over."

It had happened as a result of the Soul Reapers of the Soul Society betraying them. Because they had launched a surprise attack on the Fullbringlers who were Ginjo's friends, Aura's father, who was part of their group, had lost his life as well.

A past he did not want to recall came back to life in Ginjo's mind.

However, Aura continued to smile as she shook her head slightly.

"No, regardless of the result, you brought light back to my father's eyes, even momentarily, when all he had was fear and despair.

Though I am grateful, I have no reason to hold a grudge against you."

"So then why are you here? Based on the conversation, I understand you're working with a Soul Reaper named Tsunayashiro."

"Yes, Tokinada Tsunayashiro is my master. If I can, I would like all of you to gather under Lord Tokinada, and that is why I hastened to join you."

“What did you say? Why the hell would I join forces with a Soul Reaper?”

When Ginjo voiced his justifiable skepticism, Aura said, “The new world Lord Tokinada is building—that place, at least, should allow Fullbringers to join the strong side again.”

“...”

“I asked President Yukio about it. And did you not say it yourself earlier? That Xcution is a gathering of those with the ability to change the world?”

Then, still with a gentle smile on her face, she continued, “Will you allow me to describe to you what kind of world Lord Tokinada intends to create?”

“Right...” Ginjo thought deeply and called out to his associate next to him as though in consultation. “Tsukishima.”

“What is it?”

Like a surprise attack, the next words he uttered had the effect of reversing the situation.

“Insert yourself into Yukio.”

“Huh?!”

In the next moment, the Book of the End’s blade was sticking out from Yukio’s chest.

“Oh...” a small sound escaped the boy’s lips.

It was a perfect surprise. Needless to say, he couldn’t evade it, and he wasn’t even able to activate his own abilities. However, not a single drop of blood fell from Yukio’s body. When the blade was pulled out of him, there was not a scratch left behind. However, the vestiges of Tsukishima’s spiritual pressure were certainly there, and it was certain that Tsukishima had inserted his own existence into Yukio’s past.

“If you’ve been brainwashed, this’ll cancel that out. First, we’ll take our time hearing the truth from Yukio himself.”

As a safety measure, Ginjo would first try bringing Yukio back to being unquestionably their ally. If he had been hypnotized or

threatened in some way, Tsukishima would be able to preemptively obstruct that from happening. Though it was a stopgap measure, he wanted to eliminate the possibility of Yukio stabbing them in the back.

However, Aura showed no signs of being flustered as she continued to smile.

“It seems you are quite a hasty gentleman.” Then, as though she were showing gratitude to Ginjo, she once again gave him a reverent bow. “I must thank you for inserting that *bookmark* into Yukio, just as we had anticipated.”

“What?”

In that instant, Ginjo felt something strange in his own abdomen. When he lowered his gaze, he saw the familiar glint of silver.

The Book of the End.

The blade Tsukishima gripped was piercing Ginjo’s abdomen from the back.

“Tsuki...shima...?”

As his consciousness grew murky, Ginjo saw Giriko Kutsuzawa being cut as Tsukishima pulled back the blade.

“Wha...”

“Sorry, Ginjo, Kutsuzawa.”

Betraying no shame, a pained, somewhat cynical smile crossed Tsukishima’s face.

Before they could even ask what the meaning of it was...

Ginjo’s past was rewritten instantly through Tsukishima’s bookmark.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A CERTAIN KYOGOKU

SHUHEI HISAGI, WHO HAD BEEN DISPATCHED, and Tessai, the person who had done the dispatching, were unaware that when a Tenkaiketchu post was operating on its own, it automatically set coordinates to the center of its effective radius. In this case, the center of its effective range was...

“...This is...a Kyogoku?”

Shuhei Hisagi regained consciousness in a place entirely different from Urahara Shoten. From the moment he was sent flying he had felt a strange sense of drunkenness, like missing his footing in Dangai, but he didn’t feel like much time had passed.

“Well...that’s because the flow of time in Dangai is weird. So I guess I can’t use it as a standard to judge by.”

Hisagi, who had been transported through darkness that didn’t even exist in Dangai—through the garganta—first dedicated himself to grasping the situation he had been thrust into. Looking around, it seemed he had been transported to an indoor structure that was not much different from any in the Soul Society.

However, there was no source whatsoever for outside light, and the inside of the room wasn’t lit by hotaru kazura. Instead, it seemed to be entirely illuminated by the newfangled lighting equipment that was also used by the Department of Research and Development.

“Why, in a building like this...”

He thought that he might not have actually been transported correctly into the Kyogoku and had instead drifted into the Soul Society somewhere, but he sensed that the concentration of reishi adrift in the air around him was indeed different from that of the world of the living or the Soul Society. His knowledge didn’t extend to Hueco Mundo, but according to interviews he had done, he didn’t think that desert would contain Japanese structures such as this.

“In which case, this definitely has got to be the Kyogoku... Right?”

When he probed the spiritual pressure, he felt something rather large coming from somewhere far below his current position.

Below? Am I on such a high floor?

In addition to the spiritual pressure being distant, because the reishi's concentration around him was irregular, he had difficulty distinguishing between the individual spiritual pressures. However, one among them made a particularly striking impression on his memory.

"Wait, wait...is Captain Zaraki's spiritual pressure mixed in?"

So that means the Soul Society has made a move? I see, since my message to request Gentei Kaijo was cut off...

Because Hisagi had no idea of the separate incidents that had occurred in the Soul Society, he mistakenly came to believe that the Soul Society had independently sensed something was wrong in Karakura Town and started an investigation of their own that brought them to the Kyogoku.

Okay, but are Kyogoku really that easy to find? They might have captured members of the religious group and looked into it themselves...

It'd be a piece of cake for Captain Kurotsuchi if he had a sample of one of the posts... But I guess a lot of time really has passed...

"Well, if Captain Zaraki is here, I guess I don't have to worry about battles... Anyway, I've got to meet up with them and tell someone about Mr. Urahara."

He tried to pull out his Soul Pager, but naturally it was still blocked from communicating with the Seireitei.

Thinking that he needed to first join with the Soul Reapers who were here by following the spiritual pressure, Hisagi once again probed the state of his surroundings.

"Captain Zaraki's spiritual pressure is pretty far off...How many floors has this place got?"

Based on the fact that the other spiritual pressures seemed quite far below, he guessed he was in a tall tower or somewhere near the top of the place.

“Where’s the door? ...Huh? The hell is that?”

At that point, Hisagi realized that what he at first had thought was a pillar was in fact something entirely different. The *thing* at the center of the room was a gigantic cylindrical glass case installed on some kind of apparatus. The transparent vessel, which looked like it could easily fit an entire person, was currently empty, and though the device was also connected all over the place with electrodes and what looked like reishi tubing, it didn’t seem to be currently in operation.

“When I interviewed the Department of Research and Development, I saw something that looked like that.”

Figuring that the device might be related to recent events, Hisagi painstakingly examined it to figure out what it was and whether it had a forwarding system that led outside, but he didn’t find any written information or any data at all that indicated what the thing could be.

“Ah, damn it. If I could just get in contact with Akon... Maybe I should just break this thing. But if I break it, it might be one of those things that can’t be undone...”

As he was considering that, Hisagi heard a voice from behind him.
“Oh, that’s supposed to be my *throne!*”

“Huh?!”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t break it, if possible, since I wouldn’t have any other place in this castle to rest if you did. Yes, indeedy!”

It was an innocent voice.

Yet it was also a voice that made him feel mental and physical repulsion. Hisagi had heard that voice before—it was several weeks ago, while he was covering the Shino-Seyakuin.

He turned around to find the child who had been terribly wounded back then.

“You...”

“I’m Hikone Ubuginu! Umm...and you’re Shuhei Hisagi, aren’t you?! Thank you so much for earlier!”

When Hikone bobbed their head down in a bow in front of him, Hisagi automatically froze.

What is this? This kid’s spiritual pressure is making me...

At that moment, Hisagi had a realization.

He realized that his sense of the Kyogoku’s concentrated reishi was an illusion. Of course, the reishi in the Kyogoku’s atmosphere was already concentrated, but the spiritual pressure that Hisagi stood in was far denser than any regular Kyogoku.

Is the room filled with this kid’s spiritual pressure?

Since he had leapt right into the fluctuations of that spiritual pressure, Hisagi hadn’t noticed that he was next to the child.

The Soul Reaper, who was neither a girl nor a boy, tilted their head as they asked Hisagi, “But why are you also here, Mr. Hisagi?”

“Oh, I’m...”

“Oh! Did Lord Tokinada call you? If you’re Lord Tokinada’s guest, then please let me be your host to the best of my abilities!”

“Uh...”

When he heard the name Tokinada, Hisagi’s spine straightened. Though he had never met the aristocrat directly, he recognized at this point that it was clearly the name of an enemy.

“Tokinada Tsunayashiro is here?”

“Yes, he’s down there right now! Would you like to greet him?”

“Uh! I-Is he?”

Hikone’s openness made Hisagi hesitant and vaguely apprehensive. The situation was too strange, and he felt instinctively cautious. However, he couldn’t retreat now.

He had no idea whether this had happened by chance or was an inevitability, but it seemed that he had plunged much deeper into the bosom of the enemy than he had ever imagined himself capable. When Hisagi realized his situation, he immediately steeled himself.

At the same time, it once again occurred to him that the spiritual pressure of the child standing before his eyes was indeed very abnormal.

It contained Soul Reaper, human, Quincy, and also Hollow.

That spiritual pressure, which contained the amalgamation of all sorts of konpaku, had transformed into something different from what he had encountered in the past at the Seyakuin. The presence of Hollow had become more pronounced, and as though reacting to that, the other varieties of spiritual pressure had also increased.

This kid was dangerous back then, but this spiritual pressure is on a completely different level now.

It wasn't just instinct, but also his experiences up until that point that brought him to this conclusion.

Seriously, have I ever been so intimidated by a kid?

In Hisagi's mind, the faces of Toshiro Hitsugaya, Yachiru Kusajishi, and Hiyori Sarugaki appeared.

I guess I have been, actually.

Even as cowardice caused him to cringe inwardly, Hisagi corrected his appearance and addressed Hikone with a serious expression. "Hey."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Do you know what this Tokinada guy is trying to do?"

"You mean Lord Tokinada?"

Hikone turned toward Hisagi with their wide eyes, but didn't leave much time before they broke into a smile and answered, "I don't understand complicated things so much! But if Lord Tokinada is doing it, I think it's the right thing to do!"

"That's not something you should say lightly."

"Huh? Why is that?"

Hikone tilted their head in confusion. Hisagi chose his words carefully. "Just think for yourself for a minute. That Tokinada guy could be wrong about some things, right? Because there isn't a completely perfect person who exists in the world."

What he actually wanted to say was, "That Tokinada guy's a crook, so don't listen to him." But if he said that, Hikone likely wouldn't have even given him a chance to explain and surely wouldn't believe him.

Kaname Tosen, who had edited the *Seireitei Bulletin* in the past, hadn't shied away from concluding that evil was simply evil. On the other hand, he also hadn't written off as fools those who had been tricked by evil. But in many senses, Hisagi still didn't have as much experience as Tosen and so ended up sounding rather crude.

"Wrong? What is it that's wrong with Lord Tokinada?"

"Well, that's..."

"From whose perspective does it seem like he's wrong?"

"Huh?"

Hikone had asked that not out of sarcasm but out of genuine curiosity. Hisagi hadn't expected such an answer from a child who still seemed full of youthful innocence, so he hesitated.

"Well, you know...I can't say that it's the whole world, but in the Soul Society and the world of the living, well, in each of the societies of those places, it would look that way to them."

"I see... In that case, I don't think he's wrong to me."

"What?"

"For me, my whole world is what Lord Tokinada gave me." Hikone spoke only the truth, matter-of-factly. "I don't know any other worlds. But there's no reason I need to know about them."

"But, that's!..." Hisagi swallowed his words.

Up until then, Hikone's eyes had seemed to convey placid innocence, though they also gave the impression of a profound, cavernous vacancy. However, after the words Hikone had just uttered, Hisagi felt with certainty that they contained within them the light of a strong will.

Looking at those eyes, Hisagi thought for a moment. Hikone wasn't just being swept along by circumstance, but was planting

their own roots into the world with their own childlike, yet determined volition.

But...

Hisagi felt that there was something missing. Just looking at Hikone's face, which Hisagi now saw conveyed strong will, he couldn't help but see Hikone also as the bearer of a serious deficiency. As Hisagi's thoughts churned over this conundrum, Hikone continued, "Even if Lord Tokinada was doing something that everyone in the world thought was wrong, it wouldn't be wrong to me."

"Just...stop."

"For example, even if everyone else says Lord Tokinada is a bad person...to me, Lord Tokinada is justice! Yes, indeed!"

"Stop that!"

Justice.

The moment the word entered Hisagi's ears, he unintentionally raised his voice.

Hikone's eyes went wide as though with surprise, then they immediately bowed their head to Hisagi.

"I'm sorry. Did I do something to upset you, Mr. Hisagi?"

Hikone seemed genuinely apologetic, and Hisagi felt guilty and averted his eyes.

"No... Sorry for shouting."

Then he turned his eyes toward Hikone, realizing he couldn't run from this. The face of his blind Soul Reaper teacher flashed into his mind as his hand gripped into a tight fist.

"You should not speak about justice...so lightly."

"Huh? Why not? Lord Tokinada told me that all the Soul Reapers in the Soul Society are principled people who fight for the sake of justice. Oh, but of course, I'm not one of the Court Guard's Soul Reapers. So is that why I'm not allowed to talk about justice?"

"That's not the issue... There isn't just one kind of justice. You can't assume that the justice that Tokinada speaks of is the same one the Soul Reapers mean."

Although Hikone appeared childlike, there were some aspects about their knowledge that were more adult. Hisagi felt troubled, not knowing how to break things down and explain them to Hikone. However, Hikone grasped Hisagi's intentions and even said the words that Hisagi was hoping he would not: "Yes, sir! Lord Tokinada did say that! That's why Lord Tokinada and I might fight against all of the Soul Reapers soon!"

"What did you say?"

"Since it seems like everyone is finally here, I think that Lord Tokinada will be calling me. I'm very sorry I wasn't able to give you a proper reception, Mr. Hisagi."

After saying that, Hikone once again bowed their head and tried to leave. Hisagi was taken aback for a moment, then he tried to stop the child's retreat.

"Wait! Why have you got to fight? The Soul Reapers aren't your enemies! You don't have a reason to fight!"

Hikone turned around when he called out to them and looked at Hisagi with natural curiosity in their eyes.

"If Lord Tokinada says that all the Soul Reapers are enemies, then I have lots of reasons to fight. Isn't it enough of a reason to fight if our justices are different?"

"Killing each other isn't the only answer. To begin with, Kenpachi Zaraki is one of the people you're saying you want to fight—he's a ranking captain. He doesn't care if you're a little kid. He's not the type of guy to hold back against a strong opponent. It's just my impression here, but I think you're probably pretty strong. Still, if you do fight him, you'll end up dead."

"Will I?"

"You will, so..."

He wasn't intending this to sound like a threat, but Hisagi was desperately attempting to stop Hikone. However, Hikone broke into a gentle smile that seemed to indicate acceptance. "Then I will fight until I die for Lord Tokinada. Because no matter what happens, if I can't live up to Lord Tokinada's expectations, then there isn't any value in my being alive."

Hikone wore the expression of a child who was innocently looking forward to picnic plans for the next day.

"You idiot! You don't just say you're going to die, or that your life doesn't have any value, so easily!"

Hisagi raised his voice again, and Hikone bowed their head somewhat sorrowfully.

"I'm very sorry. It seems that I really do just make people angry."

"Don't apologize, damn it... It's not your fault. I know that." After Hisagi's frustrated reply, he started to recite a kido chant: "Bakudo number sixty-three. Sajosabaku."

"Huh!"

Chains of light created from reishi wrapped around Hikone and restrained them.

"Sorry. I think I'm Tokinada Tsunayashiro's enemy, but that doesn't make you my enemy," Hisagi declared. "You wait here. I'm going to have a talk with this Tokinada guy...even if it means I have to get rough with him."

Hikone didn't appear angered or saddened by this and replied almost awkwardly, "I'm sorry...this is hard to say, but I think that's impossible."

"What?"

Pling! The Bakudo chains broke into pieces and were sent flying. But Hisagi had already assumed that might happen. Based on his perception of Hikone's spiritual pressure, he hadn't assumed the child would be restrained so easily.

However, he was still dealing with a child. He thought he might have been able to successfully tie the child up if he exploited the

difference in their levels of experience. Needing to get another plan into motion right away, Hisagi started to put together his next kido, but...

In the blink of an eye, Hikone disappeared.

"Wha...?"

Hisagi's eyes opened wide with surprise as he felt something near his solar plexus. It was the palm of Hikone's hand—the child had come right up to his chest before he'd realized it.

Thunk. There was a light press on his solar plexus, and at the same time, an enormous amount of spiritual pressure flowed into him, vehemently shaking Hisagi's Saketsu and Hakusui.

"Guh!"

Though he didn't feel any pain or suffering, a deep, chilling darkness began to erode away his consciousness.

"Mr. Shuhei Hisagi. You won't be able to win against me, Lord Tokinada, or Ms. Aura. It's impossible for you to sway anyone with brute force."

As Hisagi's consciousness faded, that voice, which was sincerely apologetic, reverberated in Hisagi's mind.

Wait.

You're not going out there to die. I finally understand. I know what you're lacking.

Hey, wait, just wait...

Though Hisagi tried to shout, he could no longer make a sound. Hikone, who had turned their back to him, was of course smiling as they uttered the next words, which Hisagi heard as his consciousness dropped fully into the darkness.

"So please, please don't push yourself. Please take a rest here! Yes, indeed!"

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**DIRECTLY BELOW THE CASTLE IN THE AIR,
PALACE COURTYARD**

The sound of dry metal echoed through the palace courtyard.

The zanpaku-to that had appeared from Tokinada's shadow had been blocked by his own sword, which he had drawn at some point.

"Kageoni, is it? It's far beyond impolite to step on the shadow of a Tsunayashiro, you know?"

As Tokinada cackled, Kyoraku's entire body appeared from the shadow.

"How troublesome. I have to fight someone who knows my abilities from the start."

"That lunkhead! He got a head start!"

Kenpachi was indignant, and a vein popped out on his forehead when Kyoraku launched his surprise attack. From Kenpachi's standpoint, this happened after he had patiently waited through a tedious conversation, and it was clear even to those observing that he was in a bad mood.

Seeing that, Madarame and Yumichika spoke to each other, their faces oozing sweat.

"Captain General Kyoraku might be in hot water later..."

"After all, our captain hates having his prey taken from him more than anyone..."

However, Kenpachi had leapt in order to knock Kyoraku aside so that he could face Tokinada...



“Hikone.”

While he continued locking swords with Kyoraku, Tokinada’s mouth warped into a grin as he called that name.

In the same moment, an ominous and heavy spiritual pressure broke forth from the castle into the air above their heads.

“Guh...!”

All those who had gathered there were fundamentally powerful, with extensive combat experience. While Nanao, who primarily used kido, was an exception, it could still be said that this was a group that specialized in fighting on the front lines among the most powerful of their kind.

However, even they froze for a moment in reaction to that spiritual pressure.

It was the young Soul Reaper they had just confronted in the Rukongai. Though the child’s spiritual pressure was certainly of the same nature, the pressure it exerted had increased many times over in this short period of time.

After Hikone’s name was called, just how much time had really passed?

In actuality, it had only been a few seconds, but to those who stood in awe of that spiritual pressure, it felt like it had been several minutes or even several hours.

“The hell is this...?” Candice, who could barely stand it, muttered as her face dripped with a cold sweat...

Then that *thing* fell down to the ground.

The spiritual pressure transformed into a harsh wind and brought up a cloud of dust, making the surrounding air warp just from the impact. Then the child who had disseminated such sinister spiritual pressure raised an innocent voice—too innocent—with delight that seemed to be the polar opposite of the power they exerted.

“Oh, I finally landed nicely! I’m so glad!”

Hikone Ubuginu.

Not much time had passed since they had faced the child in the Rukongai. However, the version of Hikone that Grimmjow and the others saw now gave them the momentary illusion that several years had passed.

It wasn't that Hikone's stature or face had changed. The nature of the child's spiritual pressure hadn't changed either. The child's abnormal growth was in the depth of their spiritual pressure, which now gave the impression that the child had fought in several hundred battles.

"Lord Tokinada! I apologize for the delay! What would you like me to do?"

"Ah yes. Wait a bit, Hikone."

Tokinada crossed swords with Kyoraku and cackled.

"Thanks to you, it's finally complete, Kyoraku." Tokinada just barely warded off the successive attacks from Katen Kyokotsu as he spoke proudly. "That is Hikone Ubuginu...the next Soul King."

The moment those words rang out, some of those present swallowed their breaths and several narrowed their eyes as though that was exactly what they were expecting, while the rest looked as though they had no interest in that conclusion.

In terms of what they had assumed based on previous events, most of those there, including Ginjo, had to completely revise their expectations at this point. Hikone had said they were "being allowed to become the Soul King," but when the actual head of the Four Great Noble Clans, Tokinada, spoke those words from his very own mouth, the gravity of the situation was clearly different.

As though brushing aside the forceful impact of those words, Kyoraku smiled cynically and continued. "Even if you are from one of the Four Great Noble Clans, isn't it unforgiveably disrespectful to say you'll replace the Reio himself?"

"Don't make me laugh. You must know, don't you? *You know what kind of being the Reio is.* If you know that, then don't you think that in fact the most respectful thing to do would be to replace him?"

Tokinada's words as he fought on the ornate balcony were becoming difficult to make out over the bewildering clash of weapons. However, Halibel's ears picked them up clearly. The woman looked at Hikone and, without hiding her repugnance for Tokinada, murmured, "Are you saying you intend to make a little child such as this a sacrifice for the Soul Society?"

"The child isn't even coming to your aid in this situation?"

"Yes. To Hikone, our fight seems like child's play."

Tokinada temporarily moved away from Kyoraku and yelled to Hikone, "Hikone! Hikone! Look at those who are here."

"Yes, sir! I can even see some people I just met!"

"Yes, and do you like them, Hikone?"

"Yes, sir! They all took it very seriously when they fought me! They faced an opponent like me with determination! And they will become my people soon, so I don't have any reason to not like them!"

Not knowing much about them, and though Hikone had previously been antagonizing them, the child readily said they "liked them."

The exchange was more than enough to give the impression of something ominous and wrong, but the conversation that followed made that eerie innocence transform into something repulsive.

"I see. That is more important than anything, Hikone. You must cherish those you love. Do not forget to offer your sincere devotion to them!"

"Yes, sir! Thank you, Lord Tokinada!"

"But also...these are my *enemies*. Could you *kill them for me*, immediately?"

Tokinada gave that cruel order in a booming voice.

Hikone did not so much as twitch an eyebrow as they agreed resolutely, wearing an innocent expression. "Yes, sir, Lord Tokinada!"

Though the child understood the meaning of Tokinada's words, they showed not a single sign of misgiving.

"I will put my whole heart into beating them!"

"Is that...Hikone Ubuginu?"

Just seeing Hikone made a cold sweat break out on Nanao's back.

Outwardly, Hikone appeared to be nothing more than a young child who could not be determined to be a girl or boy. However, that was not in alignment with the concentration of spiritual pressure the being called Hikone contained, which made the child all the eerier.

The young "Soul Reaper-like thing" brightly unsheathed their own zanpaku-to.

"Thank you very much! It finally grew to this level because of the fight you all let me have with you!"

After bobbing their head in a bow, they spoke their zanpaku-to's release.

Of course, the release was entirely different from any of the ones Hikone had used until that point.

"Hatch and perish, Ikomikidomoe."

Then it let out its birthing wail.

Accompanied by a fierce tornado of reishi, the blade of the zanpaku-to swelled and formed the shape of a single living creature. Compared to the gigantic monstrosity from earlier, it was reduced in size, but despite that, when Ikomikidomoe stood on the ground he was a grotesque object slightly larger than a house.

The impression the creature's form gave off more acutely than before was that it specialized in *indiscriminate killing*.

For how the creature had shrunk, its spiritual pressure had become even more concentrated, as though it had balanced with Hikone's abnormal bearing in strength. This white monstrosity was surrounded by an overwhelming atmosphere that likely would have prevented a powerless Soul Reaper from so much as standing before

it. It conjured to mind the image of the beast that would bring about the end of the world.

Hikone, who stood on top of it, looked out at all the surrounding faces with eyes that seemed both pure and empty, as they politely bowed their head.

“I’m so happy I got to meet you all! Even after I kill you, I will never forget our memories! Thank you so much!”

Hikone ran Blut Arterie, characteristic of Quincies, through their hands and did something nearly unbelievable. They created a bow directly from the reishi in the air and used Quincy abilities to condense a Cero arrow, which they fired.

“Seriously. Now you’ve really done it. Sheesh.”

Liltotto’s voice was composed, but she clucked her tongue in amazement.

Hollow reishi released using that Quincy technique approached them—and in narrowly avoiding this attack by an element they were incompatible with, the Quincies had a realization. The realization was that the Hollow reishi contained in the arrow was incredibly potent. Had they been hit directly, a normal human or Soul Reaper would sustain a fatal wound, not to mention the Quincies, for whom the Hollow factor was poison.

Meanwhile, Grimmjow and the other Arrancars were turning cautious eyes not to Hikone, but to the monstrosities being created by the zanpaku-to.

“Seems strange. He has the body of an Adjuchas, but his spiritual pressure is on Vasto Lorde level... No, it would be pretty high even among the Arrancars.”

With that, Halibel referenced the character of their opponent: “Based on what he’s said, it seems he would be an ancient Menos that lived around Barragan’s time.”

Considering some of what that *thing* had said to them earlier, even if Ikomikidomoe wasn’t the oldest Hollow, they could guess he had lived a long life from far before their time. But why would a

being like that have become one of the Soul Society's zanpaku-to? Halibel didn't know the reason, but what she *was* certain about was that though he was a Hollow like them, at present, he was not their ally.

The polar opposite of Halibel and Nelliel, who let themselves speculate about what their opponent might be, Grimmjow's mind was set simply and exclusively to pondering how to bring down the opponent before his eyes.

"Cut, Pantera!"

The moment he said his release, a zephyr of spiritual pressure blew around him as well and struck Ikomikidomoe's large body like a whirlwind. In order to release his full strength right from the start, he swung his sword and transformed into his Resurrección form. Then he immediately leapt at Ikomikidomoe.

Taking that as a cue, Halibel and Nelliel also spoke their Resurrección releases.

"Hunt, Tiburon."

"Praise, Gamuza."

The storm of spiritual pressure raged in the palace courtyard like a frothing current.

"Oh!" As he watched the Arrancars transform into their Resurrección states one after another, Kenpachi Zaraki cried out in delight. When the captain saw Grimmjow's form and spiritual pressure as the Hollow immediately accepted the fight, he said with a fiendish grin on his face, "I see. That blue-haired prick isn't all bark."

"Um...Captain. I must at least remind you that right now we're on the same side as that guy."

When Madarame pointed that out, just in case, the corner of Kenpachi's lip lifted and he replied, "He *is*—for now."

Then, while shouldering his zanpaku-to, Kenpachi surveyed the spiritual pressures of Tokinada, Hikone, and Ikomikidomoe and

murmured appraisingly, “All right then...which one of them’s the strongest?”

However, as though to obstruct his evaluation, there was a change in Ikomikidomoe.

From all sides, the Arrancars—Corpse Unit included—attacked.

Ikomikidomoe remained immobile to the very end while taking the brunt of the attack, but then eventually lowered himself and quietly enlarged his spiritual pressure. Just then a gigantic eye seemed to open in the middle of his body like Fura, and his body started to gleam.

“Hm? What the hell is that?”

“I can’t figure out what he’s aiming for, but that sure doesn’t give you a good feeling, does it?”

Standing in front of Madarame and Yumichika, who were both on guard as they wondered what was happening, Kenpachi narrowed his eyes as he said, “All right, you two, buck up.”

“Huh?”

“If you don’t, you’ll end up dead.”



After Kenpachi's breezy warning, he proceeded to unsheathe his zanpaku-to and bring it down in a vertical line. At the same time, an enormous amount of reishi was discharged from Ikomikidomoe's body.

The blinding light swallowed a part of the Kyogoku.

The Cero went in all directions.

It couldn't really be called a Cero so much as a reishi explosion that centered on his body. Just as soon as the ground lifted and the palace's roof tiles were pulled off and sent flying, they vanished.

The Arrancars that had been in Ikomikidomoe's vicinity bore the direct brunt of the attack, but its power was dampened by a water shield that Halibel had instantly put up around them. Though everyone was somewhat scuffed up, they were not gravely wounded.

Considering that concentrating spiritual pressure was usually what made a Cero more powerful, diffusing a Cero in all directions would be pointless. However, because Ikomikidomoe had such a vast amount of spiritual pressure at his disposal, his Cero was even more powerful than a typical one, regardless of the fact that it had been diffused.

Nanao had used Bakudo, and the Quincies had expanded their Blut Vene to its maximum extent in order to mitigate any injuries. As for Kenpachi, he had forcibly dispersed the flash of light by cutting it. As a result, he and Madarame and Yumichika, who had been behind him, were unharmed. Kenpachi cracked his neck as he once again set out to select his prey.

"Well, that sure was close. You've got some nerve," said Kyoraku, who had been hiding in the shadows. He slashed at Tokinada as though nothing had happened.

Though Kyoraku had instantly evaded the flash of Cero by stepping into the shadow that it had created, he had no idea how his opponent had defended against the attack, as Tokinada had not even a speck of dirt on his kimono.

"Oh well, it seems the garden and estate were all for naught. I'll need to have Aura remake them later."

Tokinada smiled sarcastically as he spoke. Kyoraku replied, "You have more friends then?"

"Not a friend. She's simply a pawn."

"I don't know who this person could be, but my condolences. But...I see. Is that zanpaku-to an erosive type?"

"Oh, so you noticed."

Seeing Ikomikidomoe's form directly, Kyoraku was able to guess at the reason Hikone had some Hollow power. For reasons unknown, a pronounced Hollow nature seemed to dwell in Ikomikidomoe, which was already a rarity as a living-creature zanpaku-to. By linking that zanpaku-to with their soul, it seemed that the Hollow reishi assaulting Hikone was being infused into the child's body. Under normal circumstances, Hikone's konpaku boundaries would become unsettled, and the user's body would have burst by now.

However, whether it was due to the influence of the Fragments of the Reio embedded in Hikone's body or because Ikomikidomoe was regulating it, Hikone was taming that power and had even begun to master it.

What kind of recklessness made that possible?

Considering the nature of Hikone, a newly born Soul Reaper, Kyoraku quietly looked at Tokinada.

"Don't be so deplorable to that child. What are you intending to do with them?"

Tokinada's cruel smile remained on his face as he said, "Now that you've felt their spiritual pressure directly, you know for certain, don't you, Kyoraku?"

Kyoraku did not answer, remaining silent as he swung his sword. Dodging it by a hair's breadth, Tokinada continued to smile.

"They can become the Soul King. Just as Ichigo Kurosaki and Kugo Ginjo are able to."

"So you *were* lying when you said you didn't know much about Ginjo."

"You didn't believe me anyway though, did you, Kyoraku?"

"I have one more question for you..." At that point Kyoraku's smile disappeared. With a serious expression he asked, "Was what you told Nanao also a lie?"

"Hm...? Oh! You mean about her mother!"

"Are you really sure you weren't involved in her judgment?"

"I almost wish I could say I was, but...unfortunately, that was the truth."

Then, though they were in the middle of a sword fight, Kyoraku sighed. "I see... Too bad."

"Hm?"

Not understanding the meaning of Kyoraku's words for a moment, Tokinada was bewildered. However...

When he realized the reason for them, a delighted smile came over his face as he cried out, "So you made a Pinky Promise then! Ha ha ha! That was close!"

"I don't remember telling you about that game."

Kyoraku's Katen Kyokotsu used techniques related to various types of play, such as the games Takaoni and Kageoni. Though it wasn't strictly a game, but just linked to child's play, the Pinky Promise was an ability that channeled the implication of children saying, "Let's play again."

If either of them lied to each other, first, the liar's fingers would stop moving. At the second lie, all the bones in the liar's body would become incapacitated as though a fist had crushed them, and at the third lie, the liar would be assaulted with an intense pain as though their entrails were being pierced by needles from the inside out.

It was a technique to use in battles against opponents who were prone to lying, or for use against people who had been put under his control and whom he needed to retrieve information from.

However, since Ohana would become upset when he made pinky promises with other people, Kyoraku did not use the ability often.

And while he had it activated, there was a drawback, in that he also could no longer lie.

“I can tell without needing to see it. Aren’t you underestimating me? You really should have used that ability in the First Company barracks! Had you done so, you wouldn’t have been so late and you could have settled things!”

“I couldn’t have drawn my sword on you, much less used my shikai on you, before you even drew my suspicion, now could I? If that’s your way of thinking, I was late from the moment I didn’t kill you.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s certainly true!”

Though Kyoraku was rather pleased that Tokinada’s words were not what he had expected, Tokinada continued to provoke Kyoraku while maintaining his smile. “Really now, it’s quite irritating to tell only the truth. Oh, right—I wasn’t involved in Nanao Ise’s mother’s execution, but I did make the suggestion that there was a *possibility her daughter carried the divine sword, and that we should torture her!*”

“Guh!”

Kyoraku’s face changed color.

Satisfied with Kyoraku’s reaction, Tokinada continued to tell the truth with a rapturous look on his face. “To be honest, though, I was confident you had it. But compared to the Tsunayashiro, you are practically a peasant, even as a higher-ranked noble. I thought that you would get ideas in your head if I were to implicate you...don’t you think the plot in which I wait to tell you until the girl is persecuted because you hid the sword and it’s too late to take anything back would be so much more fun?”

“...”

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Don't make that face at me, Kyoraku! Don't worry! Ginrei Kuchiki squashed that proposal. That incorrigible old geezer—he acts hard, but really he's soft!"

"I see... So that's how it was. I need to express my gratitude to Ginrei... Take that!"

Hiding fierce vehemence behind his relief, Kyoraku continued to swing his sword. Tokinada received his successive attacks and, as though to further rile Kyoraku, asked, "What's wrong? What's with your measly fighting? Putting aside the Pinky Promise, you're not using Iro Oni, Takaoni, and Kage Okuri. Are you that frightened of my zanpaku-to's abilities?"

"Yes, I am frightened. It is quite terrifying."

"Hm?"

Kyoraku smiled boldly, and Tokinada was slightly dubious. Then Kyoraku backed off for a moment and asked something strange. "What was the name of your zanpaku-to again?"

"Do you really need me to tell you? You've already looked into it and figured it out, haven't you?"

"Yes, now I'm certain based on your reaction..." A cynical smile came over Kyoraku's face. He looked up at Tokinada from under his hat with a glare. "...that it's not true that the name of your zanpaku-to is Kuten Kyokoku...Isn't that right?"

"..."

Now Tokinada's expression went blank.

"I'll take your silence as affirmation—since we both cannot tell a lie."

Kyoraku quietly steadied his breath and went on. "I was skeptical. That your Kuten Kyokoku can send your opponent's zanpaku-to's abilities flying is certainly frightening. But, of course, that power seemed slightly underwhelming for the zanpaku-to that the Tsunayashiro family has protected all this time."

"..."

"And as for the name Kuten Kyokoku...it has a similar ring to my own Katen Kyokotsu, doesn't it? So I thought you might have blocked its power with a fake name, partly just to spite me."

There were several examples of zanpaku-to being called fake names in order to limit their abilities. Whether or not Kyoraku knew it, Yumichika Ayasegawa's zanpaku-to, Fuji Kujaku, had a fake name to hide the true ability of Ruriiro Kujaku.

"It's in your nature. Once we came up with a method to defeat that sword and began to implement that, you planned on calling it by its real name to release its true abilities, didn't you? And there was only one reason you wanted to do that—you just want to see our faces in despair. Am I wrong?"

Tokinada sighed at Kyoraku's questioning and then pinned a cold stare on Kyoraku as he said, "You really just cannot read the room, Kyoraku. If you figured out that much, why didn't you at least consider continuing with the ruse for my sake? The term wet blanket was made for you."

"You gave me too many hints. Perhaps you were hoping to pour salt in the wound, taunting me by saying, 'The name Kuten Kyokoku happens to sound awfully similar to your own sword's name, don't you think?' after your game was up. Was that it?"

"You're half right. The other half was a reminder to myself not to forget my suspicion and hatred of you."

Tokinada grinned, raising the corner of his mouth and once again letting out an obnoxious laugh.

"Sip the world and wear the horizon—"

"Huh!"

Realizing that was part of Tokinada's release incantation, Kyoraku used shunpo to close the distance between them and swiped at Tokinada.

He could not allow the man to release his zanpaku-to. Having decided that, Kyoraku had been looking for a chance all along to slay Tokinada when his guard was down. Kyoraku didn't have the time to

go through the process of Iro Oni or Takaoni. He simply thrusted, leaving everything up to speed. If the man tried to retreat, Kyoraku was confident he could pursue him and slay him.

However, at that moment something unexpected happened.

Tokinada, who had intentionally stepped forward, seemed to allow himself to be stabbed by Kyoraku's blade, and Kyoraku barely missed the man's vitals. Even Kyoraku hadn't been able to predict that move. He hadn't thought that Tokinada was prepared to let himself be wounded in order to block Kyoraku. That could only mean one thing: instead of interrupting his release incantation, there was enough value in invoking the zanpaku-to's abilities for Tokinada to put his life on the line.

"Duplicate and curtail...all of creation equally, Enra Kyoten!"

Tokinada smiled as he said the name, blood running from his mouth. Then, in front of Kyoraku's cautious eyes, the zanpaku-to blade transformed. The silver blade, stretching from a geometrical hilt of squares and cross-shaped wedges, was bright like a mirror. In the next moment, the sword body began to radiate, and a light brighter than the sun blinded Kyoraku's single eye.

"Huh?!"

A zanpaku-to that controls light?

The extravagant, blinding light momentarily robbed everyone of their judgment. However, naturally it was exactly as the Captain General of the Thirteen Court Guard Companies had predicted. Kyoraku recovered his senses far faster than any normal person and twisted his sword as it stabbed Tokinada. However, one moment prior, Tokinada had moved to kick Kyoraku and pull himself away.

"Guh!"

Kyoraku was sent flying, but someone stopped him.

"Are you all right, Captain General?!"

"Thank you, Nanao. That was somewhat clumsy of me, wasn't it?"

Smiling cynically as he stood up, he looked toward Tokinada as his eye began to regain sight. Tokinada stood there, unharmed.

“Huh?”

There was evidence of Tokinada’s kimono having been cut. However, though there were traces of blood on the skin revealed by the slashed kimono, Kyoraku did not see the wound itself.

“What’s wrong, Kyoraku?”

Tokinada, who had a serious wound until only a moment ago, was delighted. “You wanted to see it, didn’t you? This is my...no, it is the *Tsunayashiro*’s zanpaku-to that has been passed along from generation to generation, *the oldest one*...it is the one and only Enra Kyoten.”

It was not just Tokinada’s wound that was missing.

The hilt that Tokinada gripped...and the blade that had been there just moments ago...was gone.

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CYBERSPACE

"It seems that Hikone and Ikomikidomoe are using their true power. Lord Tokinada has spoken his zanpaku-to's true name."

"Your spiritual pressure perception is really on cheater level."

"I'm not omnipotent. I have simply 'scattered' pieces of myself here and there throughout the Kyogoku."

"You can turn yourself into a gas and make offshoots of your sensory organs. That's cheating if I ever saw it."

They were in a subspace Yukio had created using his powers. Ginjo and the others had gone elsewhere, leaving only Aura and Yukio in that place.

"So what are you going to do now?" Yukio asked in a cool tone while fiddling with his game.

"If I attempt to assist them at the wrong time, I'll get dragged into it. I think it would be best to wait for a good opportunity."

"What about Kisuke Urahara?"

"Well... I apologize. Let's put that discussion on the back burner."

"What's wrong?"

He'd noticed that Aura's complexion had changed. When Yukio paused from his game to inquire about it, Aura smiled thinly and said, "It seems that our guest who arrived in the 'throne' has awokened. Let us head over there."

She narrowed her eyes at the thought of the invader who was not present as she said with some admiration, "It is surprising he would show up there right from the start... What an interesting individual you are."

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PALACE COURTYARD

"Your spiritual pressure has shot up in less than half a day."

Grimmjow stated that as though seeking confirmation, and Hikone smiled and answered while fighting the Quincies high in the air, "Yes, sir! It's because all of you were kind enough to fight Ikomikidomoe! Thank you so much for doing that!"

Hikone's personality itself hadn't changed, but their spiritual pressure had risen in strength by several degrees. Though Grimmjow had voiced his incredulity, he wasn't especially surprised. When they had confronted one another in the Rukongai, he observed that the Soul Reaper Hikone had become strong enough to be mistaken for someone else just weeks after they had fought in Hueco Mundo. In which case, Grimmjow was not surprised that Hikone had progressed further in this short amount of time.

That was because he knew.

He knew a type of Soul Reaper who had made an explosive amount of progress in a short time, in just the same way, and who had continued to show striking progress even while battling.

"So you're the same as Kurosaki," Grimmjow muttered to himself as he dodged Ikomikidomoe's attacks. He asked Hikone, "You said you'd become the king, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir!" Hikone answered with an invigorated smile.

Grimmjow put on a wicked grin.

"I see...and you still believe that?"

Grimmjow was not addressing his question to Hikone, but rather to Ikomikidomoe. The zanpaku-to that had transformed into a beast cackled in a way that reverberated as he answered, "You may rest easy, young Arrancar."

The voice, which seemed to resound from deep within the ground, also seemed to have gained power compared to earlier.

"I will eventually consume that brat. I will make Hueco Mundo mine to rule."

"Knew it. That's what it felt like. I don't know why you turned into a zanpaku-to, but you're the same as us."

"You claim I am the same as you? Do not be conceited. Your ilk are a far cry from those such as Barragan and me. You are nothing more than a starved beast that crawls in the desert."

At these words from the monstrosity who clearly disdained him, Grimmjow bared his teeth in a smile.

"Looks like I made the right decision coming here after all."

Grimmjow honed his boiling spiritual pressure and started to walk right toward Ikomikidomoe.

The reason Grimmjow had come all the way out of Hueco Mundo to search for Hikone in the first place was because the boy—or girl—had piped up with words the Arrancar could not ignore.

"I don't care what the hell you are. If you're standing in my way, I'll keep going until I kill you and eat you."

His instincts were driven by a memory from the past.

"Let's walk together. You will become our king."

When he took a step closer, his flesh would rankle. The monster that stood before his eyes and the one who controlled it in the shape of a Soul Reaper child were clearly dangerous beings. The appearance of the Soul Reaper and the childishness he sensed from their tone was nothing more than a papier-mâché façade. The Adjuchas-like appearance of the monstrosity was also nothing more than a front.

He understood that.

The Soul Reaper named Hikone had a spiritual pressure with qualities similar to Ichigo Kurosaki's, but the child wasn't like a living creature so much as a pocket of nothingness that had popped up in the world. If the world itself had a konpaku, it was as though a hole were carved into it the moment that konpaku Hollowified.

The monstrosity called Ikomikidomoe was the opposite of that. The being struck that hole with everything it had, like the incarnation of avarice itself. Ikomikidomoe was perhaps a monster with an equal, if not greater, spiritual pressure than the former king of Hueco Mundo, Barragan.

"We are aware of that now."

"We were destined to be Adjuchas. But you were meant for something greater."

Regardless, he took another step.

Thoughts of losing didn't cross his mind. But these were not easy opponents to defeat. If things went sideways, he understood they could send his head flying with one hit.

However, Grimmjow did not stop walking.

He had no need to fight. After all, this was an internal conflict among the Soul Reapers, and he had no reason to be used by them.

However, Grimmjow had come here. No one had told him to come, and his reason for coming to the Soul Society from Hueco Mundo hadn't changed.

Grimmjow did not smile at Tokinada's words. He didn't doubt them either. Tokinada only destroyed the world because he wanted to see it happen. While Grimmjow had understood that was an abnormal idea and though he had recognized that Tokinada was an enemy to hate, he didn't think the thoughts themselves were entirely foreign.

That was because Grimmjow knew—no matter how trivial a reason it was, if it was one's own path, then that was enough of a reason to make an enemy out of the world.

He had only one reason to fight Hikone.

"...become the king..."

Hikone and the monster that stood before him had each declared that. Had they been normal beings, he could have brushed it aside as foolish nonsense. Had he been the person he was when Aizen controlled him with overwhelming power, he definitely would have ignored them. However, after fighting against Ichigo Kurosaki and remembering the poignant appeals from his friends, those were words he would never turn a deaf ear to.

Because if he did brush it off, in that moment he would be denying his very own flesh and his very own blood.

"Eat us, Grimmjow."

For what this declaration had called to his mind were the voices of his fellow Hollows deciding to give up their paths of their own volition and turning to Grimmjow as their king.

He was not doing this for the sake of his friends.

However, the part of them that had become his own flesh and his own blood stirred Grimmjow's instincts as a beast.

It was because she knew his nature that Halibel, who was the true ruler of Hueco Mundo, did not call herself its king. No matter how those around them viewed it, the moment she took that name, she knew she would begin a fight to the death against Grimmjow.

Grimmjow as he was now, with his instinct back, would likely bare his fangs even knowing he would lose to the likes of Aizen or Barragan.

“I won’t let anyone deny me this.”

Grimmjow condensed his spiritual pressure into the claws of his hands as he leapt right at the gigantic monster in front of him. He moved like a heroic predator, ready to annihilate even a natural disaster.

“I’m the king.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A JET-BLACK WIND ROTATED THE GEARS.

A jet-black wind scattered the new leaves.

As though claiming their equivalency, the wind simply circulated life and death.

“Offer.”

He felt as though he had heard a voice.

At some point, Hisagi realized that he was standing on top of a gigantic tree.

When he looked around, he felt almost as though he were in a forest, as a vast swath of green leaves surrounded him and thick branches gathered at his feet, through which he could see glimpses of the ground. The view of the ground was far enough down that it looked hazy. The place could fittingly be called the world tree—the existence of a wooden giant like this would be unfathomable in the real world.

“Oh... I ended up here.”

Hisagi immediately understood that it wasn’t the real world.

“Tsk...I guess this hasn’t happened since I got done in at the Reiokyū.”

Recognizing the sound of rusted iron and a thunderous machine behind him, Hisagi quietly turned around, at which point he saw a gigantic windmill standing on top of a vast plain made up of the gigantic boughs.

Though he thought of it as a windmill, this was a far cry from the pastoral word—an existence clad in rust and the smell of oil contrasted with the embodiment of nature that was the world tree. The rust-covered windmill creaked as its exposed gears, pulley mechanisms, and the chains that connected those parts and synchronized their revolutions moved. Based on the mixture of emotion and corruption in that space, Hisagi knew that it was the spiritual world that interwove his soul with Kazeshini.

Then a black wind raged around him.

The leaves changed color before his eyes as they were buffeted by the wind, drying and falling while the windmill precipitously revolved and started to come alive as it moved.

“Offer.”

Once again, the voice resounded.

In reaction to the familiar voice, Hisagi answered as usual, “It’s always the same thing. I’m not going to become what you want me to become. I’m not fighting in order to feed you my enemies’ blood.”

As though ignoring Hisagi’s words, the black wind continued to thunderously blow.

The space, which had turned gloomy, was illuminated by a lamp that had been set up in the windmill.

The foliage had made him feel as though life had withered away and turned into death, and the rust-colored windmill that had also reminded him of death now seemed to have a different aspect, as though it were a symbol of life.

“Seriously, I thought we’d reached an understanding.”

Then the wind writhed and transformed into a dark humanoid shape behind Hisagi that spoke to him.

“What you thought you reached an understanding with was this form of me, wasn’t it?”

“Huh?”

When he turned around, sure enough, there was the form of Kazeshini that had materialized in the real world in the past.

“Well, it’s fine. I am your shadow and I am the shadow of the world you view. Form and words change depending on how the light hits. But, well, if I’m going to talk with you, I’m fine with taking this form.”

Hisagi clucked his tongue as though he were irritated by the words of the shadow, which he had the longest memory of conversing with.

“Is that how it is? If you’re going to change your nature and your form, then doesn’t that mean our previous conversations were all meaningless?”

"That's not true. You really did understand an aspect of me, and you learned my name. That's exactly why you can use your shikai and why I...can call you out to this entire Kazeshini world."

In the next moment, the shadow once again turned into a black wind and went through Hisagi's body.

As it did so, it stirred words of intense craving in Hisagi's soul itself.

"Quickly, offer me blood and life that fill my soul."

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THRONE ROOM

"Ugh..."

Hisagi, who had regained consciousness, quietly gritted his teeth.

"Damn it...are you telling me to kill the enemy again?"

Since he had first learned its name, Kazeshini had requested blood and life countless times. Though he was a far cry from the ranks of captains such as Kenpachi, Hisagi had enough combat experience to be called a veteran by the general soldiers. He had killed enough enemies that he could no longer count them, but his zanpaku-to's voice never waned.

"Are you saying I should have killed Hikone?"

Or perhaps it was that the zanpaku-to's voice was pointing out his own vulnerability.

"Like I'd let you use me. The only ones I swing my sword for are the Court Guards."

He didn't intend to say that his own actions constituted an act of justice. He didn't have the qualification to say that. However, the one thing he could not do was renounce his beliefs.

He was a Soul Reaper.

Soul Reapers did not kill Hollows out of hatred. They killed them in order to purify them.

As he considered whether certain actions were appropriate as a Soul Reaper, Hisagi thought that slaying Hikone was not the correct choice for him as a Soul Reaper, or personally as Shuhei Hisagi. Then

again, he didn't think that Hikone was an opponent he could kill even if he resolved to do so.

But still, I can't run from this.

Hisagi rose unsteadily and immediately started to search for the exit.

"There aren't any doors. How'd Hikone even get out?"

The walls around him as well as the ceiling were all sealed, and he couldn't even guess how someone would exit or enter from outside.

"Ah well, guess I'll just have to break through."

Hisagi prepared himself to smash through the wall using kido...

"I believe it will be difficult for you to destroy that wall with your abilities."

"Huh?!"

Hearing a woman's voice behind him, Hisagi put himself on guard and turned around, only to find the woman he had just met in the world of the living standing there.

"Aura...Michibane!"

"It is such an honor that a prodigy assistant captain such as yourself would remember my name."

"At this point, that doesn't even qualify as sarcasm."

Hisagi had been extolled as a prodigy in his Shinoreijutsuin days and had cultivated an excellent record. However, when compared to the genius of Hinamori's kido and Hitsugaya's sword techniques, he understood that his natural gifts were next to nothing.

He hadn't been dispirited by that revelation and had reached his current position by continuing to study without pause, but Hisagi himself was saddled with the anxiety of wondering whether he deserved to be an assistant captain. Consequently, he never shirked his training, in order to ensure he was worthy of holding the title.

Even so, there were certainly domains that existed that he would never be able to reach.

Hisagi recalled Hikone's words from earlier.

It's true that someone like me might not be able to win against Hikone or this woman.

However, for Hisagi, that wasn't a reason to stop walking the path he was on.

Once he readied his zanpaku-to, he turned to Aura and asked, "Where is Mr. Urahara?"

"Please don't be worried. We have not harmed him in any way. Our goal isn't to hurt him."

"I see... Then I'll change my question. Where's the exit? And where the heck is this place?"

He wanted to pressure her to release Kisuke Urahara immediately, but Hisagi decided to gather information first instead. Even if he did manage to defeat Aura here, he wouldn't be able to just walk out of the place, which made this plan a nonstarter.

"This is the protective throne. It has been made so only Lord Hikone and Lord Tokinada may enter or leave, to ensure Lord Hikone is not attacked by insurgents. Though I can pass through the walls to enter."

Aura chuckled as she said that, but Hisagi kept up his guard. "So you really do intend to make a Hogyoku to make Hikone the Soul King."

"Because that is what Lord Tokinada wishes."

"So you're planning on using the Hogyoku's power to destroy the current Reio? You're trying to do the same thing as Aizen..."

"Hm?" At that point, Aura seemed puzzled, then after a few seconds, she nodded as though she understood. "Oh...I apologize. It seems that you are not aware, Mr. Hisagi. You seem not to know what kind of being the Reio is."

"Hm? No, I know that. The previous Soul King was killed by Yhwach, but thanks to Mimihagi...the right arm of the Reio that was in Captain Ukitake, I thought things turned out fine in the end."

Though in truth Hisagi had not readily believed the thing that had risen from Ukitake's body into the sky had been the Reio, the fact

that the world continued to exist even now meant that he must still have been supporting it even after Yhwach died.

Yet Aura's words troubled him.

"What? Are you saying that's not true?"

"I see... While you are not entirely incorrect...with Lord Hikone becoming the Soul King, the world will become even stronger. What would you do if that were the case?"

When Aura asked that as though changing the subject, Hisagi answered seriously, "That's not something I can decide lightly. But if Hikone said that they wanted to become the king on their own, then first of all, I'd try to stop them."

"And why is that?"

"Because...that kid still doesn't know anything." Hisagi gripped his sword and spoke in a somewhat regretful tone. "Hikone told me that they have only the world that Tokinada gave them. If that's what the kid decided after seeing the whole big world on their own, then I wouldn't say anything. If, after that, they said they were going to become the Soul Reapers' enemy, then I'd be ready to stand in their way as an enemy too."

After stating that clearly, Hisagi continued, "But that kid only knows the world through Tokinada. It's like he's being manipulated. So...I need to teach the kid that there's a lot more world out there."

At that point, for some reason, Hisagi remembered Tosen's face, and after hesitating slightly, he added, "Well...on the other hand, I'd like to know what the world looks like to that kid. Then I'd decide whether I approve or not."

"..."

"So I've got to see this Tokinada guy face to face."

"Are those your words...as a journalist? Or as a Soul Reaper?"

When Aura asked that, her smile gone, Hisagi affirmed, "All together, those were my words as Shuhei Hisagi."

Aura heard him out, then continued after a slight pause. "You can't be sure Hikone would be happy after learning about the great big world."

"Huh?"

"In some cases, happiness is to live and die confined in a tank without knowing anything. There are some who realize they are unhappy only when they find out about other worlds."

Aura's words, which seemed oddly sincere, left Hisagi bewildered for a moment. Then, as though something had just occurred to him, he scowled and said, "You're not...talking about yourself, are you?"

Aura neither confirmed nor denied his suspicions and continued as though testing him. "Don't you think that's the case for Hikone Ubuginu?"

"I thought so too until just earlier, but...that kid has their own will too. It's just...the kid's lacking one thing. I just want to tell them that, is all."

"..."

"If you've come here to kill me, I'll fight with all I've got. In exchange, if I win, I'll make you release Mr. Urahara."

When he turned the point of his zanpaku-to toward Aura, she appeared to be deep in thought. Then she broke into a smile and walked toward Hisagi.

"Huh? Hey, what're you going to do?"

"Please don't get the wrong idea. I simply have one request for you."

"A request?"

He was cautious, but he didn't feel anything like hostility coming from her. Not knowing what her intentions were, Hisagi was apprehensive as the woman gently brought her face close to his.

"-----"

She whispered something only Hisagi could hear.

"Huh?"

Not understanding what she meant, Hisagi was perplexed for a moment. However, before he could ask, she disappeared.

“Hey, where did you...”

When Hisagi looked around, he noticed something.

A door that hadn’t been there just a moment ago had appeared in the wall of the room and was partially open.

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ABOVE THE PALACE COURTYARD

Ikomikidomoe had turned into a monster and was battling the Arrancars while Liltotto and the Quincies faced Hikone Ubuginu overhead. The spiritual pressure Hikone contained was astonishing as the child rapidly fired an endless stream of arrows with enough power to kill a Quincy with one hit. On the other hand, when the Quincies attacked, Hikone used a combination of Hierro and Blut Vene to mitigate almost the entire attack. Liltotto clucked her tongue at their immeasurable opponent.

“This is getting close. This kid isn’t as bad as Ichigo Kurosaki, but they’re pretty big trouble.”

“Since they’re trying to actually kill us, we might be the ones in more danger. That is scary....” Giselle spoke as though she were talking about someone else while she fired several arrows from her Heilig Bogen. “There we go.”

When Hikone swept all of those aside with one arm, Candice tried to strike the child with a thunderbolt.

“Was that lightning?! It’s so tingly and fun!”

With those short words, the matter was settled, and Hikone easily dispersed the electricity.

Meninas McAllon took that momentary opening to bring down her fist with full power, however...

Although Hikone dropped toward the ground several dozen meters after taking that hit on the elbow, they fixed the reishi under them in place and held steady while a scraping sound rang out in the sky.

“You’re built pretty solid.”

Though she had been the one doing the punching, Meninas’s fist was warped and crushed with several broken fingers.

Hikone turned their eyes upward toward the Quincies after receiving the blow from the woman whose specialty was brute strength and saw that there were several reishi clumps around them.

“Huh!”

These were reishi bombs made by the zombified Bambietta. When Hikone touched them, the child was caught up in a chain explosion.

The explosive fire brilliantly lit the sky, but not a single one of the Quincies let their guard down. They knew the power of Bambietta’s blasts, but based on the sense they had gotten thus far, they didn’t believe they had killed Hikone.

In fact, once the smoke cleared Hikone appeared, merely sooty.

Bambietta’s power turned the reishi of the parts it touched into bombs. A person on the receiving end would experience their skin itself turning into an explosive, but perhaps because Hikone’s recovery abilities were similar to a Hollow’s, Hikone’s skin seemed to undergo the same superfast regeneration. In addition, it seemed that Hikone had defended against most of the damage from the blast itself, and it didn’t appear as though their actions had been impeded.

“That’s nice. I’d like to make that kid into a zombie. I think then we’d be invincible too.”

“The kid’s got Hollow spiritual pressure mixed in them. Nothing good’s going to come of that.”

Liltotto scolded Giselle for coveting Hikone’s power. Though at first glance it appeared as though they were self-assured, in actuality, they were toeing a fine line. The “Cero arrows” that Hikone sometimes fired as a counterattack were rather strong, and in addition, Hikone could feint using Bara between attacks.

At present, the five of them were able to attack and retreat, but with their fatigue accumulating, that balance would eventually

collapse. If even one of them made a mistake, the battlefield would crumble in the blink of an eye. Since Liltotto had made that assessment, she hoped to settle things promptly.

However, Hikone, who had fought and defended in silence until then, smiled and piped up, "I've learned how you attack now."

"What?"

In the next moment, Hikone's movements clearly changed. While earlier Hikone had been fending off Heilig Pfeil directly from the Quincy, they started to intercept those with their own arrows.

In the time that five of the Quincies fired arrows, Hikone fired the same number in the same amount of time. On top of that, Hikone's rapid fire showed no sign of abating, and their deflection shots seemed to anticipate the Quincies' Hiren Kyaku movements, following Liltotto and the others like guided missiles.

"...This is close."

At the same time, Liltotto realized something. Though the Quincies had been dispersed while attacking Hikone, now the child was herding them into one location.

In the next moment, just as she feared, she realized an extraordinary amount of spiritual pressure, different from any before, was gathering in Hikone's right hand.

The timing was such that it would be impossible to evade.

Determining that, Liltotto activated her own ability and, just as she had earlier, attempted to eat the reishi of the Cero.

Oh, this thing might make my stomach explode.

Feeling as though the surrounding space itself was being condensed into Hikone's hand, Liltotto imagined her body scattering in all four directions.

However...

Something that exceeded that spiritual pressure, creating a chill that seemed to freeze them on the spot, ran through the sky of the Kyogoku.

"...Oh!"

Hikone stopped, with the spiritual pressure they were going to release for the Cero still pent up in their hand, and slowly turned around. Death itself in human form stood before them.

"I only got to see a little of it, but...you're the strongest here, aren't you, kid?"

Kenpachi Zaraki looked at Hikone and grinned.

An expansive amount of spiritual pressure overflowed from within the man. The additional spiritual pressure that he pressed together into a foothold was unable to withstand the spiritual pressure coming from Kenpachi himself and would crumble as soon as it solidified.

Since he had never learned proper Hoho, the way he fixed reishi in place was haphazard, but he was able to continue standing in the air regardless, likely due to the many years of battle experience he had cultivated.

"..."

Rather than answering Kenpachi, Hikone turned the Cero stopped in their hand at Kenpachi and shot it. The twisted Cero, which contained black undulations within bluish white light, warped the space around it as it assaulted Kenpachi. However, Kenpachi mowed it down with a single swing of his zanpaku-to that was not even in shikai form, and the pressure from his blade was enough to disperse the Cero's light.

A portion of the scattered light pierced the earth, and the affected area burst as though a meteorite had struck.

Witnessing that, Candice groaned and said to herself, "What is with that guy? He's literally a monster."

"Course he is. He's the guy even Gremmy couldn't kill." Liltotto, who had been saved by a hair's breadth, spoke impassively while experiencing complex emotions.

Yumichika appeared behind them then and, as though voicing Liltotto's thoughts, said, "That's irony for you. The fact that he couldn't kill the captain ended up being your salvation."

“To be honest, we were ready to assume you might stab us in the back.”

Connections ran deep between the Quincies and the Eleventh Company. Half a year ago, during the war, Liltotto and the others had assaulted Kenpachi after he was wounded in the battle against Gremmy and, at that time, had injured and killed a large number of the Eleventh Company.

Though Yumichika hadn’t witnessed that scene directly, he had heard about it from the surviving members of the Eleventh Company after the war. He had already seen the zombies of his friends that Giselle had created en masse during the war.

“I wouldn’t do something as ugly as that—I’m not like you.”

“Is that supposed to be pride? That’s sure kind of you.”

In the past, when she had partnered with the Soul Reapers to defeat Yhwach, Liltotto had been just as cautious, but in the end, she hadn’t been stabbed in the back while working.

Then again, Kenpachi and the others had been in the bathroom when they had gone through the gate and disappeared partway through, so they actually hadn’t ended up working together.

“According to the captain, he was most unable to forgive himself for ‘not being able to stand after an attack like that.’” In a matter-of-fact tone, Yumichika continued, “I’ll just say this, but don’t think it extends to us too. Especially when it comes to that zombie tamer, after she toyed with everyone in the company. I don’t think anyone’s feelings about her will change no matter how many times they cut her down. I don’t know how long the agreement is going to be valid for, but you better be thankful the Captain General compromised with you.”

Though he spoke in a calm tone, there was a steeliness in his words that indicated he wouldn’t take no for an answer. However, it was likely that it went against his personal philosophy to ignore the will of the captain and kill them.

As Yumichika looked at them coldly, Liltotto shrugged with a cold look in her eyes as well.

"You are definitely holding a grudge though, aren't you?"

"Hey, hey, Lil."

"Don't, Gigi."

"Tsk. I didn't even say anything though."

Giselle, being Giselle, harbored a strange hostility toward Yumichika for reasons unknown, so Liltotto was at the point of wanting to withdraw temporarily in order to avoid any unnecessary discord.

Madarame, who had just joined them, said with a sour look, "Either way, we haven't got time to squabble with you right now. It's not like I'm completely on board with this either, but you've already got an agreement with the Captain General."

A majority of the Eleventh Company were battle-crazy. In Madarame's case, he had fought under Kenpachi Zaraki and thought that if he were going to die, he wanted it to be in battle.

In the past, he had preached to a Fullbringer boy, "If you're going to risk your life, then do it for someone who would die for you," but if one were to ask Madarame himself who he wagered his life on, in one important aspect it wasn't for others so much as for his own sake.

Many of those who wore the yarrow company insignia wished to meet their end in battle as their ultimate form of self-righteousness, and Madarame also staked his life persistently on his own *dignity*. He wasn't dying for Kenpachi's sake, but instead wished to fight until his last moment under the visage of his revered captain.

It was said that Komamura, who had in the past also claimed that he "left his life with Genryusai Yamamoto," in the end did not risk his life for Genryusai himself, but for the Seireitei, the place the Captain General had been protecting.

Because of that, Madarame thought that to fixate on revenge for his own selfish reasons would only be an insult to his companions

who had fought fiercely and were lost in battle. Of course, it depended on what the fight was, but he narrowed his eyes as he stared Giselle down and said, “We’ve also killed several of your friends, haven’t we? I don’t like the mouth on that zombie prick, but that’s what battles have always been like.”

“...Zombie *prick*...?”

“Calm down, slut. This isn’t the time for that.” Liltotto heard Giselle mutter with a superficial smile but with absolutely no sign of emotion in her eyes and sighed as she soothed her companion. “Well, regardless of the circumstances, it means we’re allies right now. But don’t expect us to go as far as cooperating with you.”

As though he hadn’t had any use for cooperation from the start, Madarame put on a bold smile and turned his eyes to Kenpachi.

“Fine, just stay back. Anyone who gets in the way of the captain’s *fun*—even us—won’t make it out in one piece.”

Hikone had released several Cero arrows, but Kenpachi repelled most of them. Though one in five arrows hit him directly, they didn’t seem to have much of an effect.

“What’s wrong? That can’t be all you’ve got?” Kenpachi said, quickly approaching and swinging his blade.

Hikone met the attack with the top of their shoulder, but it passed through the Blut Vene and Hierro, easily sinking into the child.

“...Guh!”

Hikone immediately moved away, but the blade had already torn through their flesh. Fresh blood flitted in the Kyogoku’s air. However, the spiritual pressure that circulated the Blut Vene in them immediately stopped the bleeding.

“That Kurosaki also had a strange way of stopping his bleeding. You related to Ichigo or something?” Remembering the first time he had fought Ichigo Kurosaki, Kenpachi smiled.

“I’m so pleased to be compared to such a famous hero! Mr. Ichigo Kurosaki is supposed to be the same as me, so maybe his Quincy

blood did that. Does that mean that you might be Mr. Kenpachi Zaraki?"

"Now that you mention it, I never told you my name. You know about me?"

"Yes, sir! Mr. Shuhei Hisagi informed me about you earlier! He said that if I fight Kenpachi Zaraki, I'll die, so I shouldn't do it!"

Madarame and Yumichika reacted to those words even before Kenpachi.

"Hisagi...? Hey, wait. Hisagi's here?"

At that point, Hikone twisted just their head around to peer at Madarame and smiled, saying, "Yes! He's in the throne room, so I just made him faint and came here! Yes, indeed!"

"What could that man possibly be doing..." Yumichika seemed shocked as he spoke, then he looked up. "The throne... You don't mean he's in that tall, floating building, do you?"

"What'll we do? Should we go save him?"

Yumichika started to nod at Madarame's words, but...

"I'm very sorry, but you cannot do that." With a hollow smile, Hikone rebuffed Madarame and Yumichika. "Yes, because I was told to kill you all immediately!"

Before Hikone finished speaking, the child disappeared. In the next moment, a tempestuous wind passed between Madarame and Yumichika.

"...Guh!"

It was the zanpaku-to pressure from Kenpachi bringing down his sword and cutting Hikone as the child went around to the Soul Reapers' backs.

"You two are in the way. I almost chopped you up with the kid."

Madarame and Yumichika looked at Kenpachi as he clucked his tongue. It was then they realized that they had almost been ambushed by Hikone, who was behind them.

"Sorry."

Breaking into a cold sweat, Madarame and Yumichika immediately backed down.

“That was amazing! I was so close to piercing their hearts though...”

Hikone uttered that disturbing phrase with a smile on their face, and Kenpachi said in irritation, “Quit being greedy. You’re in the middle of a fight with me.”

“You’re right. It looks like I need to kill you first.”

Hikone narrowed their eyes and leapt at Kenpachi.

When it came to speed, Hikone was like quicksilver. With Soul Reaper shunpo, Quincy hirenkyaku, Hollow sonido, and Fullbringer **kōnpaku tamashi** subjugation all combined in their motions, they had reached the pinnacle of movement techniques.

Just as Kenpachi thought Hikone had disappeared, the child was running on a crash course toward him.

The zanpaku-to that Hikone presently carried had transformed into a monster and was taking position on the ground. In other words, though Hikone was empty-handed, by using Hierro and Blut Arterie to enforce their limbs, they were able to create slashing attacks that far outstripped the average zanpaku-to.

In the span of a blink, from beginning to end, Hikone assailed Kenpachi’s body with karate chops and kicks. Though Kenpachi swung his sword lightning-quick between the attacks, Hikone just barely avoided the sword and hit with yet more successive attacks.

However, Kenpachi’s body was also abnormally steadfast. A Soul Reaper with normal spiritual pressure wouldn’t be able to leave a mark on his steel physique even using a zanpaku-to. Though his skin was slightly cut and he was bleeding from Hikone’s attacks, they didn’t come close to inflicting a fatal wound.

Madarame and Yumichika watched from afar, confident in their captain’s supremacy, and actually admired Hikone’s skill and spiritual pressure in being able to wound Kenpachi Zaraki even slightly. However...

“I’ve finally gotten used to how hard you are!”

Once Hikone said this, which almost seemed like something Kenpachi Zaraki himself would say, they saw Hikone cut deep into Kenpachi’s flesh, and their admiration was overcome by shock.

A spray of blood spattered through the air, and Ken-pachi’s captain’s jacket was dyed red. However, as Kenpachi was enshrouded in the scarlet mist flowing from his very own body...

As one who carried the Kenpachi name, he laughed.

“Thought so...”

In the middle of the successive attacks, just as the eye patch that had fallen off fluttered through the air, the billowing spiritual pressure that boiled up from under it vigorously agitated the pronounced reishi in the Kyogoku.

Then, the human form that had transformed into a mass of pure violence that might even destroy the concept of death itself, opened its mouth.

“You seem like you’ll be the most fun.”

≡



REIOKYU HOOHDEN

“Oh, so there you were.”

When the Manako Osho high priest, also known as Ichibe Hyosube, called out to him, Oh-Etsu Nimaiya, who had been sitting on a cliff of Hoohdan while looking at the empty space, shrugged and stood up.

“Oh my, my, what could possibly be the matter, Osho? It’s pretty rare for you to take a stroll all the way over here.”

“Well, I thought it was rarer still not to feel your presence in Hoohdan or at that bar filled with all your *sword maidens*.”

When the Osho stood next to Oh-Etsu, he looked at the empty space that the man had been gazing into earlier in the same way and stroked his deep black beard as he said, “Hm...so Ikomikidomoe is in the Kyogoku?”

“You don’t have to ask, do you? You are the Osho, after all. You see everything in this world—you see, all see, see you again, am I right?”

“Mhmm. I have no idea at all what you’re saying, but it’s exactly as you say.”

After that absolutely meaningless exchange, the Osho spoke about what he sensed with his own eyes.

“Karma is a strange thing. A beast that once called itself a Menos among the Menos that did not break its mask fights Vasto Lorde Arrancars that progressed on a different route of evolution from itself.”

“You sure we don’t need to help? That Tsunayashiro bad boy and the Fullbringer princess seem like they’re having free rein.”

“Don’t mind them. Our role is to strive to make sure the world’s bottom continues on as it ever has. For even if the ones who rule the various gardens change, it is not as though the foundation of all creation will change.”

“As always, you’re quite businesslike when it comes to these things.”

“No, no. While I do not intervene in the matters of the world below, I do like the current Court Guards and the world of the living. If we aid anyone, it would be the Kyoraku family’s tender lad. Though we have a connection with the Tsunayashiro ancestors who are part of the Four Great Noble Clans, we have no reason to favor their many descendants we have never met.”

The Osho crossed his arms at that point and nodded firmly as he surveyed the lower world from high above in Hoohten.

“Whether they have free will or not is one matter, but as long as we have someone who stands atop the heavens to act as a linchpin and continues to center the world as it is now, all is well. All quiet in the world, it might be said.”

Then, turning slightly, he fixed his sights on the Reiokyū that floated at the center of the five Squad Zero Riden and the thing that was enshrined at its center. The Osho grinned and murmured, “Don’t you think so, Yhwach?”

≡

In the far ancient days...

Before the Seireitei had formed into the shape it is today, and before the Soul Reapers had wielded the weapons that it may be said had given them their roots, a single Menos Grande plagued Hueco Mundo.

It was the dawn of the Hollows as the world formed into the shape it is today, and all evolution was in chaos.

That Hollow was a powerful being above all the rest and evolved into an Adjuchas. The Adjuchas remained an Adjuchas, not wanting to take humanoid form. The old, wicked spirit continued to remain in its monstrous form out of its own tenacious volition.

Barragan Ruizenban and many other powerful beings that had existed even longer than him had evolved to attain forms as Vasto Lordes and Arrancars. When Barragan and the others had their power struggles in Hueco Mundo, the gigantic, sentient beast growing in the sea of reishi sand did not take the side of any group.

A torrent of sinister power, he continued to devour all according to his desires, eventually leaping out from Hueco Mundo to stretch his hands to the konpaku-abundant world of the living and the Soul Society that was crowded with Soul Reapers clad in thick spiritual pressure, continuing to destroy and consume everything like a tempest.

He could not evolve, but the sinister metastasis continued his infinite growth.

Though a Gillian carrying a similar factor later appeared and obtained an ability called Glotoneria, finally becoming known as the Nueva Espada, that is a separate matter.

This Hollow was different—no matter how many he ate, he did not take on their abilities and never acquired further powers than those he was equipped with from the start. In exchange, the spiritual pressure he devoured would accumulate into an inexhaustible supply within his gigantic body. The number of Hollows that Adjuchas devoured finally approached the number of grains of sand on a beach, and eventually, he started to become known even within Hueco Mundo as the “willful calamity.”

The gigantic beast that would continue to grow infinitely and Barragan, who had the power of destruction that went by the name of “senescence,” had a quandary in that they would end up in a draw due to their affinity. So an implicit understanding was formed between the two that they would not meddle in the business of the other.

In that time, he devoured the multitude of spirits that entered his vision and made them into his own flesh and his own blood.

However, that way of things could not go on forever.

He tried to scale the skies in an attempt to consume the Reio, but as a result of the battle with Soul Reapers such as Shigekuni Yamamoto, who was still a youthful hero at the time, he was defeated at the hands of the Manako Osho and Oh-Etsu Nimaiya.

“己己己己巴” was his name.

"Since we have the opportunity, how about we give him an elaborate name?"

"You are but a nameless lump of Hollow that only devours those similar to you—巳己巳己."

"It is fitting that without reaching any place, you continue to cannibalistically eat yourself indiscriminately."

"That is, until something appears that can tame all those fragments."

Through the Manako Osho's zanpaku-to Ichimonji's ability Shinuchi Shirafude Ichimonji, the empty monster's name was painted over as 巳己巳己巴, Ikomikidomoe.

Because of his singularity and his expansive spiritual pressure, he could not be entirely destroyed. After his name and existence had been remade, through Oh-Etsu Nimaiya's hand, he was kneaded into a zanpaku-to and was simply sealed away.

Oh-Etsu had initially planned to hold back the thing by turning him into a full Asauchi, but the Soul Reaper was still in the process of doing that research and was not capable of entirely erasing individuality in those days, so the monstrosity ended up becoming a demonic sword with the ability to devour his own wielder's konpaku.

Since his origins were as a Hollow that had condensed countless konpaku together, he was also not easily purified, and if they destroyed him as a Quincy would, the scales of the world might have tipped.

As a result, they had ended up sealing him away at the bottom of Hoohten's seafloor until a Soul Reaper with the tenacity and spiritual ability to properly use him appeared.

A thousand years had flowed by...

The monstrous sword's seal had been undone, and he had been passed into the hands of a certain child.

A young child, who had been born not long ago.

Into the hands of someone who was created to become the Soul King, the being that the sword had attempted to devour of his own volition in the past.

≡

THE KYOGOKU PALACE COURTYARD

The vast garden had been reduced to a wasteland by Ikomikidomoe's violence.

Grimmjow, who stood in front of it, breathed raggedly as a bold smile broke out on his face.

"Hah...that all you've got?"

He spoke as though he were tough, but he was a mess of wounds.

"How insolent, for a mere lowly soldier..."

It wasn't only him that collided with the monster head-on, but Halibel and Nelliell, as well as all the members of the Corpse Unit, on whom deep wounds had been inflicted.

Had Ikomikidomoe simply been a gigantic Hollow, he would have been a small fry to Grimmjow and the other Arrancars. However, this monstrosity called Ikomikidomoe that had been turned into a zanpaku-to was a singularity that contained all the advantages of a Gillian's largeness, the variation of an Adjuchas, and also the density of a Vasto Lorde's spiritual pressure.

The Hollow's large form did not seem to slow him down in the slightest, and the way that he could simply move using sonido was just a nightmare, considering how massive he was. By hurling himself at a speed undetectable to the eye he could break several bones, and even if his target dodged him, his talons were like gigantic trees, raining down on them with the speed of a zanpaku-to.

The scene looked like humans wielding Japanese swords against a Japanese chimera, but it wasn't as though Ikomikidomoe was entirely unwounded. Though he continued to instantly regenerate, the spiritual pressure he consumed to do that surpassed the spiritual pressure that he could take in from his surroundings. Then

again, those around him could clearly see that if they eased up on the offensive even slightly, his wounds would immediately heal.

"Oh well, this is so inelegant. I think at this rate all we can do is make you exhaust your energy in vain," Dordoni said, analyzing his enemy's fighting ability.

Next to him Halibel agreed. "I share the sentiment. This isn't the type of opponent we can stop with one effort."

"Yes, there's no reason to be stingy with him."

Looking at Nelliel, who was standing some distance away as she spoke, Dordoni broke into a smile and shrugged.

"Well, well. I would never have believed I'd be fighting alongside the person who stripped me of my number three. I suppose I should think of fate as a way to savor the deep flavors of life, like fruit liqueur in a chocolate latte."

"I don't really understand the metaphor, but that sounds kind of good," Nelliel replied with a deadpan look on her face. "I have many opinions about you, but this isn't the time, I suppose. I'll take my time paying you back what you deserve next time."

Nelliel was staring at him with a strange pressure, and Dordoni was flustered as he called out, "Huh?! Pay me back?! For what?! Did I do something to you, Nelliel?!"

"When I was small, you did plenty of things, didn't you? Like trying to blow me away, trying to kick me to death, and worst of all, trying to use me in order to bring out Ichigo's powers."

"What are you talking...oh, well, wait just one minute! This spiritual pressure and the color of your hair... You couldn't possibly potentially be... Wha?!"

As though a strange thought had just come to him, Dordoni was plainly confused, but before he could re-spond, Ikomikidomoe's talon rained down and gouged at the surroundings.

"My my, to not allow us even the time for banter is the epitome of inelegance, beastie. However, it has been a while since I have had an invigorating battle. It is unfortunate this is not a duel, but let us

dance to our heart's content!" Dordoni yelled, then unleashed his own abilities.

"Whirl, Giralda!"

A tornado wriggling like a two-headed snake surrounded Dordoni, and two giant beaklike bone fragments at the end of each tunnel of wind struck at Ikomikidomoe's gigantic form.

Because of the mods Szayelaporro and Mayuri Kurotsuchi had added to him, his base power was vastly increased from when he fought Ichigo Kurosaki. The speed of his wind was several times faster than before, and their very existence gouged into the ground around him. The earth and sand intermingled into the pair of rampaging wind whips, turning the wind into gales that seemed as though they would smash apart everything within range.

"Fool. You think something as piddling as that could... Hm?"

Though Ikomikidomoe calmly attempted to flick away the attack, the tornado gradually began to transform. As though syncing with Dordoni's tornado, Halibel had drawn turbulent waters close to it. The eddy of water and wind mixed to turn into a waterspout of rampaging hell with cold fangs crossing through it as it surrounded Ikomikidomoe.

"Curse you...you impudent mites..."

After his irritated voice rang out, Ikomikidomoe's gigantic eye once again started to glow. Though Ikomikidomoe animatedly moved to try to release an explosive multi-directional Cero to blow away the whole waterspout, suddenly a section of the waterspout near his eyes exploded and turned into vapor, robbing him of his vision.

"Hm?!"

"Ugh, he reattached stuff I already ditched. That perverted scientist is *so* aggravating," muttered Cirucci, who was in Resurrección form a slight distance away.

The woman, who bore gigantic birdlike wings, had shot her iron Golondrina blade into the waterspout. Her blade, whose rotation

had drastically increased in frequency of cycles due to her mods, would instantly scatter any water or earth they touched. She had used that to create a smoke screen from earth, water, and spiritual pressure to blind Ikomikidomoe as she pierced his body.

“...What insolence!”

Ikomikidomoe’s enraged bellow resounded.
That smoke screen was able to blind his senses for a mere moment.

However, for the battle-seasoned Arrancars, that was more than enough time.

Nelliell’s quiet voice crossed the storming, rampaging space as though permeating through it.

“Lanzador Verde.”

The waterspout, vapor, spiritual pressure, and even the space itself was drilled through by the lance that had emerged from her zanpaku-to. It headed toward the enemy in a straight line as it plunged forward. Then, the attack that had once even penetrated through the Hierro of Nnoitora, whose pride was being the hardest of the Espada, deeply pierced Ikomikidomoe’s solitary central eye.

Ikomikidomoe raised a scream beyond words and bent back dramatically. Chuhlhourne, who had been stationed behind him, struck a pose while speaking in a singsong manner. “My, oh my, oh my! You seemed so high and mighty just earlier. That was such an ugly scream you made there. You had so much to say about Lord Barragan, but too bad for you! Your power and dignity are a far cry from his... And you don’t even compare to me as far as beauty is concerned! My condolences!”

Chuhlhourne followed this needlessly long preface by unleashing Reina de Rosas.

“Rosa Blanca.”

A black briar expanded and started to wrap around Ikomikidomoe’s huge form.

Of course, the briar was unable to cover all of his gigantic mass, but it entangled half of him and rapidly started to draw up the reishi in his body.

"You...all of you...curse yoooooou!"

Regardless, that did not immobilize Ikomikidomoe. Using up all his power, he kicked up off the earth and leapt into the sky in order to tear off the thorns.

However...

"Sorry...this road is closed."

Using a hammer throw with no regard for her broken fingers, Meninas slammed Ikomikidomoe's gigantic body the opposite direction into the ground.

Ikomikidomoe reflexively created offshoots of himself directed toward the sky. However, all of them were disposed of by way of Liltotto's fantastical mouth.

"Gross... Ah, well. Guess we're beating this guy up first."

The Quincies, who had come down in order to avoid getting caught up in Hikone and Kenpachi's battle, shot Heilig Pfeil at the ground all at once from high in the sky.

"Hah, now just get down and grovel!"

Candice shot down a successive Galvano Javelin, and the dazzling flash of lightning harshly lit the surroundings.

"Whoa. That's super festive. Why don't you give him some fireworks too, Bambi?"

Giselle gloated delightedly while she continued to shoot Heilig Pfeil, and in reaction Bambietta smiled, her eyes still blank.

"Okay...I'll try hard. Ha ha... A festival...with everyone... How fun..."

Bambietta's smile was not uncertain so much as filled with childlike innocence as she shot down a massive amount of reishi from her hand. That reishi light turned into a rain as it poured down and turned into explosive fire when it reached Ikomikidomoe's

surface, making a dazzling ensemble with the lightning that embellished the waterspout and briar.

“Seriously...I can’t believe more of you keep getting in the way of me and my prey,” said Grimmjow as he suddenly released the spiritual pressure he had built up in the claws of both his hands and created gigantic reishi claws of five pillars each to his right and left.

Normally he would have fixated on fighting one on one, but just this time, he felt a strange nostalgia and thrill. It might have been his instinct as a beast to occasionally hunt in a pack. Or it might have been that he had remembered others he had walked with in the past who had called him their king.

Then again, Grimmjow himself didn’t think about the reason. He simply turned to the enemy at hand and brought down his own attack.

Luppi, who was off on his own and watching from the side of his eyes as Grimmjow used his trump card, smiled.

“That’s my line, Grimmjow. I’m going to destroy that goliath.”

He started to gather a significant amount of spiritual pressure into the eight tentacles of his Trepadora.

“Not yet... You think this is enough to destroy me?!”

Ikomikidomoe, sensing the abnormal spiritual pressure gathering in front of him, once again created a massive number of offshoots from his body and tried to form a shield of flesh, but...

He stopped abruptly.

When he felt as though everything had gone numb, Ikomikidomoe was bewildered.

It wasn’t just that the offshoots he intended to create were not appearing—he couldn’t even move a single one of his limbs. One who had been hiding themselves until that moment addressed the monster as he succumbed to the paralysis. “Seriously, you just change your spiritual pressure willy-nilly. I had a heck of a time making the adjustments... But it looks like you got complacent.”

“...?!”

"You wrote me off and were planning to get to me later, weren't you? That irritated me, but because of that, I had plenty of opportunity to *observe* you."

The man who had appeared behind the bewildered Ikomikidomoe manipulated his fingers as he continued, "Nakk Le Vaar would probably put it this way, wouldn't he...?"

As he pointed at Ikomikidomoe, whose gigantic body he had immobilized, a delighted smile formed on NaNaNa Najahkoop's face as he spat out what had been the favorite phrase of one of his former associates, "You know what? That was fatal."

-----"

Somewhere in his immense form his vocal cords were paralyzed, and Ikomikidomoe could not even let out a shriek.

As his body lost all capacity to resist attack due to Najahkoop's ability the Underbelly...Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez's Desgarrón and Luppi Antenor's eight-fold rapid fire Gran Rey Cero kicked in.

Those two acts of violence that were furnished with the "destruction" form of death drove into him simultaneously.

≡

OVERHEAD

"...Ikomikidomoe..."

Hikone murmured that expressionlessly as Kenpachi brought down his sword on the child.

"You think this is the time to worry about someone other than yourself?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to!"

Apologizing and dodging by a paper-thin margin, Hikone waited just a moment before saying to Kenpachi, "Will you please give me just a little bit of time?"

"Hunh? What're you getting up to?"

Kenpachi was dubious, but Hikone smiled innocently and answered, "Why, of course, I'm getting ready to kill you! Yes, indeed!"

“...Interesting. Are you going to use a bankai or somethin’?”

A standard strategy would be to kill the opponents before they could use their trump card. However, those kinds of tactics held no interest for Kenpachi. And since only Madarame and Yumichika were beside him, no one was around to scold him for it. Had Kyoraku been there, he would have used that opening to at least try to stab Hikone from behind, but the Soul Reaper was on the ground and fighting Tokinada.

“A bankai... Yes, that might be what it is, but I’m not sure.”

“Hunh?”

“Since it’s Ikomikidomoe, it might need to be called a Resurrección.”

Before even finishing their sentence, Hikone nosedived recklessly to the ground.

≡

THE GROUND

“Impossible... How could I be defeated by urchins such as you?”

“You’re still kickin’? You sure are a stubborn dirt bag,” Grimmjow said in exasperation as he moved forward to serve the finishing blow.

Ikomikidomoe’s gigantic form was at last mostly destroyed and had turned into a statue that could only groan his resentments.

“Curse you! If I just had my name! If I could just get back my true name, what I could do to you...!”

“Hunh? I don’t know what you’re grumbling about, but you really want those to be your last words?”

Grimmjow used his own fangs to cut his fingertip and started to accumulate spiritual pressure in his hand mixed with his blood to shoot a Gran Rey Cero. However, before he could release the Cero, a voice addressed Ikomikidomoe from above their heads.

“You already have a name, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

At Hikone’s voice, everyone turned their eyes to the child.

“Ikomikidomoe, you’re my zanpaku-to!”

Almost as though he were frightened of that innocent smile, Ikomikidomoe’s voice quivered.

“No...not that name...do not call me by that name...”

Ignoring these pleas, Hikone said to those nearby, “Thank you very much! Thank you for *weakening* Ikomikidomoe to this point!”

“Hunh...?”

Grimmjow knitted his eyebrows, not understanding what that meant.

Hikone simply held their hand out toward Ikomikidomoe and called that last name.

“Ikomikidomoe, Eight Views of the Fall of the Phoenix.”

“~~~~~.....”

The monstrosity’s gigantic body glimmered, and right as it seemed to crumble away, it turned into a yin and yang wind of black and white that wrapped around Hikone.

In the next moment, Hikone’s body transformed into a form like an Arrancar wearing a shihakusho, like a fusion of Hollow and Soul Reaper. The shadow of Hollowlike reishi seemed to crawl and wriggle under the child’s skin.

The once-transformed monster Ikomikidomoe had returned to the form of a Japanese sword. Within the pure white of that sword, a blotchy pattern intermixed in the zanpaku-to grasped in Hikone’s hand.

It was not only the child’s form that had changed.

It was almost as though all the missing pieces had perfectly snapped into place, evolving Hikone’s spiritual pressure into something on an entirely different level. Ikomikidomoe’s spiritual pressure hadn’t simply been set over the top of the child’s. As though that ancient Hollow’s spiritual pressure had become a key, it seemed to be unlocking limiters that had been in Hikone all along.

Just by being in proximity to the child, a stinging despair seemed to penetrate the skin of everyone around. Those who felt the

peculiar spiritual pressure, which was different even from Aizen's, recognized not with words but through instinct... that the child in front of their eyes did undoubtedly have the qualities to become the Soul King.

"Well then...I'll take care of you all afterward!"

Though the child had obtained such expansive powers, their character had not changed a bit from earlier. That consistency made everyone around the child feel an ominous sense of intimidation, and as a result the group hesitated a moment too long.

Using that small opening, Hikone once again leapt high up into the sky.

Hikone reached a height that a normal Soul Reaper could not reach in one breath with nearly the same force as a cannonball. Then, after simply solidifying the midair reishi, they ran through the Kyogoku's sky with the swiftness of a god.

They ran to the man waiting in the sky who was their greatest opponent in that place.

They ran in order to sever the life of the one who bore the title of the strongest Soul Reaper, Kenpachi Zaraki.

≡

INSIDE THE CASTLE IN THE AIR

"What is this spiritual pressure...?"

As Hisagi ran to the exit of the vast, multistory building, he sensed the robust spiritual pressure coming from below and reflexively stopped. His whole body oozing cold sweat, Hisagi realized that a spiritual pressure he had encountered earlier was mixed within that vast spiritual pressure.

"Is that...Hikone?"

≡

PALACE INTERIOR

WE REWIND THE TIME TO JUST SLIGHTLY EARLIER...

While Grimmjow and the others faced Ikomikidomoe, Kyoraku and Nanao were confronting Tokinada, who carried his zanpaku-to in shikai form.

Looking at the zanpaku-to that Tokinada carried, Nanao shivered from a strange chill.

It has no blade?

No, that's not right.

I feel an ominous spiritual pressure...

There really is a zanpaku-to in front of that hilt.

If that were the case, why couldn't she see it? Based on the earlier flash, was it in fact a zanpaku-to that manipulated light? In that case, she could believe the reason why they couldn't see the blade body was because he was using the refraction of light, but that wouldn't explain why the wound on Tokinada's abdomen had disappeared.

As Nanao's doubts piled up, Kyoraku looked at Tokinada with calm eyes as he said, "It seems that isn't any normal zanpaku-to. Do you feel like telling us what its ability is?"

"You really think that I would?"

"I don't suppose you would."

Tokinada of course continued to smile, looking down upon them and simply remarking, "Don't worry, you'll probably know soon enough."

While still holding the hilt of the missing zanpaku-to, Toki-nada then said, "In exchange for your life, Shunsui Kyoraku."

"You sure are deranged. I'd like to settle this as peaceably as possible though."

"Did you already release the Pinky Promise? You want peace at a time like this?"

"Of course I do. There's nothing better than settling things through litigation. If you end up dying, the upper-class aristocratic dignitaries will be up in arms about it."

When Tokinada appeared dubious, Kyoraku, who was an upper-class aristocrat himself, smiled cynically. "After all, it would be the

trial of the head of the Tsunayashiro family—the head of the Four Great Noble Clans. We cannot allow for the one in a million or even one in a billion chance of being wrong. We *do* have to protect the Soul Society's million-year history."

"..."

"Please have no fear. We will have an aboveboard, proper trial. We will bring the truth to light, even if it takes a million years."

"Kuh!" As Kyoraku spoke these words in a courteous, formal way, Tokinada blurted out in laughter, "Kha ha ha ha! So that's what it's come to! You plan to strip me of my wings with such nonsense, Kyoraku?!"

"The Four Great Noble Clans have their wings stripped the moment they are born. Since in exchange for great power, they themselves become the linchpin that supports the Soul Society of their own volition...or rather they offer their bodies to become the supporting pillar that holds up the three worlds."

Kyoraku's words were mixed with sarcasm.

To Nanao, Kyoraku seemed to be speaking about the responsibility that he took as an aristocrat, but Tokinada seemed to understand what was really meant by the words. Complex emotions crossed his face as he smiled and fixed a stare on Kyoraku.

"Should you really say that, as the descendant of those who only accepted the benefits without sullyng their own hands?"

"I can say it. At the very least, there are those who agree with me, even those who are in your position."

"What?"

In that instant, Tokinada felt a chill behind him and reflexively leapt to the side. Because of this motion, the attack on him was somewhat mitigated, but he was still sent flying as a result of the roundhouse kick Yoruichi had landed from behind.

"Guh..."

"The conversation's gone on for too long. See, my foot just slipped."

Another Soul Reaper was waiting where Tokinada had been sent flying.

“Bankai...Tekken Tachikaze!”

“Uh!”

From beside Tokinada, who was attempting to stand up, Muguruma's fist and his fist-hilt shaped zanpaku-to stabbed deep into Tokinada's body. Then, a chain of destructive blasts exploded between Muguruma's fist and Tokinada, shredding his organs as he was flung the other way.

“Oh, that was a clean hit. Pretty good teamwork for the short lead-in.”

At Yoruichi's aloof words, Muguruma regarded Tokinada guardedly. “Is he dead?”

“Best if we don't get careless. The guy tried to drive his sword into my foot armor more than once even in that state.”

“Oh! So it really is an invisible blade then, huh?”

They doubted that was its only ability, but at the very least, it gave merit to their caution if it was invisible.

“Well, I felt like I could see the blade for a moment. Any-way, we can't give him the opportunity to use its ability...”

Though Yoruichi had started to run in order to pursue him, she suddenly stopped.

“What...?”

The foot armor that had been cut by the invisible blade had become abnormally heavy.

In the few moments that she hesitated to observe this, Tokinada chuckled, and he stood up.

“Dear me...didn't I tell you that I am terrible when it comes to fights?”

The only thing about him that was torn apart was his kimono. They could not detect a single scratch on him at all.

“You're...unscathed?”

Muguruma's eyebrows knit together—he was sure he had felt something hit his hand.

The group, who knew they did not have the time to use Kaido, firmed their guard as Tokinada gripped the bladeless zanpaku-to in front of them and broke into a merciless smile.

"So, please do die quickly."

Then, slowly, he readied the zanpaku-to's hilt as he made a contradictory request. "And make sure you suffer as comically as possible."

The statement was contradictory and twisted.

When they heard him say that, Kyoraku and the others shuddered with a sudden chill.

It was not just them.

Ikomikidomoe's fight had ended, and the Quincies and Arrancars that were watching Hikone head toward the skies also felt the sensation. Even Madarame and Yumichika, battle-seasoned as they were, felt the strange chill and turned their eyes to their surroundings. With the exception of Kenpachi, who was focused on Hikone coming toward him, all of the invaders felt the impending danger and tension vibrating in their bodies.

In the next moment, Kyoraku felt the beastlike spiritual pressure that seethed from behind him. He took Nanao's hand and leapt to the side. In that instant, *something* as large as a bear passed through the place the two had just been.

It was a strange sphere, about three meters in diameter that resembled nothing so much as a gigantic mouthful of fangs.

When Kyoraku saw that, his eyes opened wide.

"That's..."

He had a clear memory of that strange object.

There wasn't just one of them.

Looking at the countless objects floating from the courtyard that were nothing more than spheres with mouths, Kyoraku spoke a single name—the name of the brutal and peerless zanpaku-to that

his friend, the seventh Kenpachi, a man named Kuruyashiki, had used in the past.

“Gagaku Kairo...”

“What’s wrong, Kyoraku? You look as though you’ve seen a dead man walking.”

Tokinada said that with his arms spread, and Kyoraku smiled cynically as a bead of sweat dripped down his face. “What do you think our job is? I’m used to seeing corpses.”

As he spoke, he narrowly dodged one of the gigantic jaws that approached him from behind and sank right into a shadow with Nanao in his arms.

“Oh, so you can even dive into the shadow of a zanpaku-to if it is your enemy. I had no idea.”

As Tokinada smiled happily, he started to search for where Kyoraku would emerge.

“Will you let the woman run off to a safe place first? Or will you recognize her as being strong enough to fight with you and come to slay me?”

As Tokinada attempted to provoke them, a blade thrust up near Tokinada’s feet as though in response.

Tokinada leapt to dodge it, and Yoruichi approached him from behind.

At some point, she had taken off her foot armor and regained her normal speed, but...

Shiver.

The faintest, slightest amount of spiritual pressure indicated that something was wrong, and all the cells in her body cried out as she stopped her foot just as it was about to reach Tokinada.

In the next moment, something like a flurry of cherry blossoms, which was in fact a group of infinitesimal blades, passed in front of Yoruichi’s foot and grazed it. A section of them scratched her skin, creating a spray of blood. Luckily the wound was not deep; however,

had she kicked him as intended, it was clear her foot would have been chopped to bits.

“Was that a trick of my eyes...? I’m sure I just saw the Byakuya boy’s...” Yoruichi was certain she recognized the storm of blades that had already disappeared.

“It couldn’t be...”

It seemed Kyoraku had also seen the blades that had appeared suddenly, and he broke into a cold sweat as he guessed at the true power of the Enra Kyoten that Tokinada carried.

An attack that made that which it cut heavier.

The wound that had healed before they realized it.

The strange creatures from Gagaku Kairo’s shikai itself.

And the exact same storm of blades as Senbon Zakura.

Though he wanted to deny the logical path this led him toward, with the latter two the conclusion had already made itself clear.

The power to copy another’s zanpaku-to’s abilities at will.

As though to mock Muguruma next, Tokinada brought out a new power from Enra Kyoten.

Tokinada suddenly knelt and punched at the ground.

Something reminiscent of a chakram, a disk-shaped blade, was gripped in his hand, and the moment he touched the ground with it, the earth around him groaned. The entire courtyard’s base warped as it swelled and wriggled like a massive living thing, transforming into lances that assaulted Muguruma.

Muguruma was not the only target. The Arrancars and Quincies that took on Gagaku Kairo’s strange creatures were attacked by the ground itself, and they dodged just in time.

“Hey, this guy’s zanpaku-to couldn’t be...”

Dealing with the earth lances by scattering them with his own zanpaku-to, Muguruma landed next to Kyoraku and Nanao, who had appeared from the shadows.

Then, as though he had timed his reply, Kyoraku addressed Tokinada with a serious expression: “Wabisuke, Hisagomaru,

Senbon Zakura...and just now, that couldn't have been Tsuchinamazu."

When Kyoraku said that name—one of the zanpaku-to possessed by Zennosuke Kurumadani who was formerly in charge of Karakura Town—Tokinada smiled faintly as though in admiration and he opened his eyes wider.

"Oh, so you even know about Tsuchinamazu. Does that mean you know about the zanpaku-to of all the company members?"

"To some extent. Despite appearances, I'm the Captain General, so I've at least looked at the data on the generations of those in charge of Karakura Town. Although I didn't think Tsuchinamazu would be capable of this magnitude."

"There are many zanpaku-to powers that will increase in ability according to the spiritual pressure of its user. Hisagomaru is very useful. Though Seinosuke's younger brother can only take in slight wounds, when I use it, I end up like this even after that cut from you went right through my belly."

The zanpaku-to that Hanataro Yamada carried, Hisagomaru, was a nonstandard zanpaku-to that could heal the injured by absorbing the wounds of those it cut. Kyoraku judged that Tokinada had likely used Hisagomaru's powers by cutting himself in order to absorb the wounds that Muguruma had inflicted on Tokinada earlier.

Hanataro's sword shouldn't have been able to absorb wounds when they were serious though. It seems that the abilities are corresponding to Tokinada's spiritual pressure...

Next he had used Izuru Kira's zanpaku-to Wabisuke's power to make Yoruichi's foot armor heavier. The moment Nanao realized that a shiver went down her back.

"It can't be... A zanpaku-to that can use other zanpaku-to's powers."

"Still, we should investigate whether he really can use all the abilities. If its power is that strong, it might have some limitations,"

Kyoraku said in order to alleviate Nanao's worry as he very carefully examined Tokinada's actions.

However, as though to prevent this observation, Tokinada unleashed his next move. Just as they seemed to see the invisible body of the sword quiver, a dense, gray smoke blew up.

"Oh! Haineko...!" Nanao immediately realized its identity and called out.

In the meantime the strange creatures of Gagaku Kairo approached, and Kyoraku and the others evaded those as they also leapt continuously to avoid the ash that pursued them.

The ash's shadow was too murky and thin for him to sink into. Anticipating that as well, Tokinada set forth to attack them as they fled.

"Hado Number Fifty Eight Tenran!"

A tornado broke out and incorporated Haineko's ashes in the wind, quickly attempting to swallow up Kyoraku and the others. Though he wasn't as fast as Yoruichi, Kyoraku was confident in his shunpo. He was somehow able to escape the ash, but another problem awaited him.

"This is bad..."

He moved away and looked behind him. The wind that Tokinada's kido had stirred up was distributing the ash around a vast area. Those on the ground were being attacked by it one after another.

However...

"Cascada."

The cascade that Halibel had created was like a waterfall that coursed through the sky horizontally and washed away the ash and strange creatures.

"I think I've seen that power before." When she had confronted Hitsugaya in Karakura Town, she had seen the three battling subordinate Soul Reapers use the same abilities from the corner of her eyes. Because of that, Halibel was able to guess Tokinada's

zanpaku-to's nature and let slip, "Is it like the ability of Glotoneria in Aaroniero?"

Though the Arrancars could not judge whether he had stolen others' zanpaku-to's abilities or was simply copying them, it made no difference which it was since either way, his power meant trouble.

Quincies included, they all turned cautious eyes toward Tokinada. It seemed that they too had continued to fight the strange creatures of Gagaku Kairo, and they seemed to understand that those creatures were a kind of ability and that their user was Tokinada.

Aside from Hikone, who was high in the sky, further up than the building that floated in midair and slashing as they stepped on reishi footholds to climb higher, and Kenpachi who was taking those slashes while moving higher himself, that meant all the Soul Reapers and Quincies in the place and also the Arrancars were confronting Tokinada.

Additionally, backup had appeared on the scene.

"What is that terrible spiritual pressure up there? Huh? That couldn't be Kenpachi and Hikone, could it?"

After dealing with Ikomikidomoe's offshoots, Hirako had finally come onto the scene.

"Captain Hirako. So you made it out in one piece."

At Kyoraku's words, Hirako grinned and replied, "Of course I did. But that thing I glimpsed earlier wasn't really Rangiku's Haineko, was it?"

"I'll get right to the point. The person over there is Tokinada Tsunayashiro...and his zanpaku-to's ability is to copy other zanpaku-to. He's used at least six different abilities at this point."

"Seriously? He sure brought more trouble."

Hirako's face showed genuine displeasure. Muguruma asked him, "Shinji, if that guy uses Sakanade's power, could you use it on us and reverse it?"

"You ask that like it's easy to do. Well, nobody would be laughing if he copied my bankai, but I'll try something... Though I don't think that anyone other than me could master Sakanade."

As Hirako spoke, he probed the presences of those around him. Because he had spent many years handling Sakanade, he could generally tell almost instantly in what way someone had been reversed. Then again, there was the concern that he would be attacked while he was trying to reverse them back, though it would likely be difficult for Tokinada to make those complex calculations while fighting.

Although if this Tokinada fellow is on Aizen's level, then we'd be at checkmate.

The sense of unease remained in Hirako's mind as he focused himself on Sakanade. He considered that it would clearly be a disadvantage to face so many enemies even while using several zanpaku-to abilities...

"Well, now...it's my first time facing a group of such formidable opponents as this."

Tokinada smiled boldly.

Then, as Halibel's turbulent stream approached him from the front, he projected a different ability using his sword's invisible body. A flame like the sun dispersed and instantly evaporated the water Halibel controlled.

"Ryujin Jakka!"

When Nanao thought back to when Kyoraku and Ukitake had faced Genryusai Yamamoto to attempt to save Rukia, her skin oozed sweat. The arid air dried that sweat instantly, but Kyoraku sounded relieved as he muttered, "Oh good."

"Captain General?"

Nanao was dubious, but Kyoraku replied, "That temperature is a far cry from old man Yama's. It seems that his abilities being based on spiritual pressure can go either way."

Then again, he still could not let his guard down. By Kyoraku's assessment, Tokinada's spiritual pressure was the same in strength as the other Four Great Noble Clans members Byakuya Kuchiki and Yoruichi Shihoin. It could be thought of as a silver lining that although the lineage of the Four Great Noble Clans' spiritual pressure tended to be on a higher level, they did not reach a power that was beyond the bounds of common sense.

"Don't you think it would have been better to have the child Hikone hold that—that zanpaku-to?"

Kyoraku spoke sarcastically, remaining vigilant of his surroundings. Tokinada, while manipulating flames, said, "That *thing* is too meek, and if I did allow them to hold the sword, they would likely devote themselves to abilities such as Engetsu and Daiguren Hyorinmaru, and that would be the end of it."

When Tokinada roared with laughter, Kyoraku narrowed his eyes.

So this is the Tsunayashiro family's treasured sword. They certainly can boast about being the governors of history.

Of course, if he used that with old man Yama's or Aizen's spiritual pressure...

...

Aizen...?

Shudder.

As though he had had some sort of premonition, all the cells in Kyoraku's body shivered instinctually. As though Tokinada had sensed that quiver in Kyoraku's spiritual pressure, he snickered and used a move to derail Kyoraku's train of thought.

"Bakudo Number Twenty One Red Smoke Escape."

A red smoke diffused explosively with Tokinada at its center and shrouded the wasteland that had once been the courtyard.

"Huh!"

All those surrounding were vigilant of the next attack that might appear from inside the smoke.

Wait.

It couldn't be!

Kyoraku realized *that* was what Tokinada was attempting to do. To be more accurate, the moment that he realized the ability of Tokinada's zanpaku-to, the possibility of *that* had been in the back of his mind, and he might have been subconsciously afraid of it.

"Don't look! Close your eyes!"

At the same time that subconscious threat connected with his thoughts, Kyoraku attempted to yell, but...

As though calculating that timing, Tokinada's voice made Kyoraku's and Nanao's reishi quiver.

"Bo...

dhi...

dhar...ma..."

"Guh!"

It was one of the games that Kyoraku's Katen Kyokotsu possessed. When an enemy used an attack with spiritual pressure, it was a technique that allowed one to travel along that spiritual pressure in the shortest distance possible to attack. Since that technique had been activated, if he looked at Tokinada, then it would become his "win" and he would be able to inflict Tokinada with a fatal wound. Further, there was a restriction that Tokinada always should have had to be in a position where they could see him.

Not even a few seconds had filled the void.

When Kyoraku realized that he wasn't being attacked, he looked at Nanao.

As though she were trying to use her own kido in order to clear the Red Smoke Escape that Tokinada had produced, or perhaps trying to set up a defense, she was refining spiritual pressure in her hands.

So he's aiming for her!

Because he had realized it, Kyoraku was not able to not see it. He could not keep from opening his eye.

In order to protect Nanao, Kyoraku opened his remaining right eye and looked at the sword that approached Nanao. It was a zanpaku-to that looked like a swift whip with a spearhead at its end.

—*This is Rose's...*

—*But from the smoke?*

—*Oh no. —That voice was a bluff.*

—*He hasn't invoked the game.*

As all these words crossed his mind, he was led to one conclusion...

He couldn't close his eyes to it.

Even if “The Bodhidharma falls down” was a bluff, the blade that was approaching Nanao before her eyes was coming from her blind spot. Tokinada’s attacks were not so weak as to allow someone to defend against them while their eyes were closed.

“Don’t look! Close your eyes!”

Several moments delayed, the words that he was attempting to say finally came out of his mouth. However, they didn’t come in time. Before those around him could understand what the words meant, Tokinada had already finished.

Even though Kyoraku had come upon what Tokinada was aiming for, he ended up already *seeing* it.

It wasn’t just him.

Some of them, in order to dodge the approaching Senbon Zakura...

Some in order to intercept the still writhing Gagaku Kairo...

Some before they could escape from the thin smoke of Haineko...

Some, some, some...

They were all carefully watching, trying to determine the infinite number of “zanpaku-to” that Tokinada dispatched.

At around the same time as Kyoraku, Hirako, who had realized Tokinada’s aim, looked at the Shinso blade that approached him. His sense of logic was exceeded by his battle experience and the instincts that told him he would not be able to dodge that attack with his eyes closed, which made him too late to close his eyes.

Because of that, no one was able to evade it.

Crunch. Along with the noise of something being smashed to pieces, all the zanpaku-to in front of their eyes seemed to disperse like water evaporating.

Kyoraku and Hirako had expected that, but for that reason, they were mortified.

The Soul Reapers and Arrancars who understood what it meant opened their eyes in fright.

The Quincies, who had no idea what significance it held, looked on in disbelief.

With the exception of Kenpachi, who only had eyes for his duel high in the sky with Hikone, they had all seen it.

In other words, they had seen the moment that Sosuke Aizen's zanpaku-to, Kyoka Suigetsu, shattered its shikai.

≡

“What is going on here? How big is this tower?”

Even as he complained, he ran through the palace with complete concentration. Although he had been able to leave the throne room, he still hadn't found anything that looked like an exit from the building itself.

He felt that he'd been heading in the direction from which he sensed countless spiritual pressures for quite some time, but the structure was like a complex maze and hadn't allowed Hisagi to escape easily.

He sensed that the spiritual pressure of Hikone had swelled explosively, and Kenpachi Zaraki's had shot up with a staggering force. It seemed they were clashing far up above in the sky.

“Damn it... So I was too late!”

All he could think was that Hikone and Kenpachi's fight to the death had begun.

Though Hisagi continued to move his legs, trying to find a way out even a second sooner, at that point he realized that there was another spiritual pressure he recognized. Though it had been hidden

by Kenpachi's spiritual pressure and he hadn't noticed it, there were several other familiar spiritual pressures too.

"Captain General Kyoraku?! And also Ms. Yoruichi...and even Captain Muguruma!"

That so many powerhouses had gathered meant that Karakura Town's isolation had probably become a larger issue, even to them. That was what Hisagi assumed, but...

"Hm? These spiritual pressures...are Arrancars...and Quincies?! What the hell is going on here?!"

Not understanding what was happening, Hisagi suppressed his nerves and his heart thumped as he ran.

After he had run for a while, Hisagi's anxiety grew.

"Their spiritual pressures have started to weaken?"

Accompanying that realization was the beginning of a fear that was different from the one he'd had until now. Hikone, who had that absurd spiritual pressure, was fighting Kenpachi, he realized. In that case, who was *currently* making the Captain General and the others' spiritual pressure weaken moment by moment?

Is it Aura? No, or is it...?

Since Aura's spiritual pressure was scarce to begin with, he couldn't tell whether she was there from where he was. However, he could make out an ominous spiritual pressure that he had never felt before ensconced where Kyoraku and the others were.

This spiritual pressure...it couldn't be Tokinada's...

Hisagi earnestly held back his unease as he continued to run. Finally he discovered nonartificial light breaking through and used shunpo to run to it at once.

It was likely a window to allow in outdoor light. Jumping onto the window frame, which was big enough for a single Soul Reaper to pass through with room to spare, Hisagi immediately surveyed the situation outside...

That was when he first realized he was not in a multistory tower, but a gigantic building floating in the air.

“Wha...?”

A gale of pronounced spiritual pressure brushed his cheek. The wind that blew up from below cycled around the gigantic building, making the structure that floated in the air seem as though it were in its own cramped world.

“This is practically like the Reiokyū...”

As he uttered this impression, which was the same as Hirako’s and the others’, Hisagi looked above his head momentarily. From that position, at a height that made their forms hazy, he saw what looked like two stars snapping at each other. If he were to approach them without enough caution, he would likely end up caught and torn to shreds between the two spiritual pressures. In fact, even looking up at them like this, Hisagi was seized by the illusion that his own spiritual pressure was twisting his flesh.

Meanwhile, when he turned his eyes to Kyoraku and the other presences he sensed below, he found a scene that made him doubt his eyes.

“There’s no way...”

Seeing it from afar he couldn’t be certain, but it looked as though Kyoraku and the others had partnered with the Arrancars and Quincies and that they were being drastically overpowered by a single Soul Reaper.

Hisagi was unable to just stand there. He leapt from the window, falling down toward the battleground spread below his eyes.

He still had no idea what he would learn of the Soul Society’s darkness on that battlefield.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“SO THIS IS THE REIOKYU.”

“I understand how you feel, your majesty.”

“What are you talking about, Haschwalth? I’m not feeling a shred of emotion from looking at this decaying grave.”

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UNDER THE CASTLE IN THE AIR,

FORMER PALACE COURTYARD

When he saw Hisagi swoop down directly into the middle of the battlefield, Kyoraku seemed surprised.

“That couldn’t be...Shuhei?”

Though Kyoraku did not seem fatally wounded to Hisagi, the Captain General had injuries over his entire body and seemed barely able to stand. Beside him, Nanao was holding Kyoraku’s sleeve, and though she was mostly uninjured, she seemed to have consumed most of her spiritual powers, as though she had used kido to the extent of her ability.

The situation around Hisagi was even more confusing to him. He saw Quincies whom he remembered fighting in the past as well as the Corpse Unit that worked for Mayuri. He even saw the Arrancar woman who had fought against Hitsugaya in Karakura Town’s decisive battle. However, none of them appeared to be either the allies or enemies of Kyoraku and the other Soul Reapers; they all seemed to be hesitating over whether to even move, and he didn’t see any sign that they would attempt an attack. If he had to guess what they were doing, it seemed as though they were all devoted solely to defense.

When they saw the bewildered Hisagi, the people at the scene responded.

“Is that Shuhei? Why’re you here?” Muguruma, who was on his knee, asked in shock. Chiming in, Yumichika and Madarame, who were back to back and vigilant of everything around them, also spoke: “Oh, Assistant Captain Hisagi...so you really were here.”

"Hey, wait, Yumichika. We can't assume he's *real*."

Not understanding why Madarame and the others were casting looks of surprise and caution toward him, for the time being Hisagi looked to the person highest in the chain of command for instruction.

"Captain General Kyoraku! What the heck is..."

Though Hisagi tried to run to Kyoraku, he was forced to stop. That was because the point of Katen Kyokotsu that Kyoraku carried was slowly being turned toward him.

"Captain General...?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Shuhei—no, Assistant Captain Hisagi."

Even as a trickle of blood dribbled from his forehead, Kyoraku wore his usual gentle smile. Still, he did not put down his sword as he continued, "There are a lot of things I'd like to ask about, like why you're here and what's going on in Karakura Town. But, I'm sorry; it's better if neither of us gets close to each other."

"I don't understand. Just what is going—"

Hisagi was interrupted by an unfamiliar voice from behind him.
"You. Where did you come from?"

"Huh...?"

"Well, well... I don't think you were part of the lineup that arrived with Kyoraku. I haven't sensed the barriers or anything beyond them being penetrated, either. How did you break into this place?"

Though he had a Soul Reaper's spiritual pressure, the bearing of the man Hisagi saw then was somehow ghastly and twisted, which made Hisagi feel fairly sure of the answer when he asked, "Are you...Tokinada Tsunayashiro?"

"Well, what an impolite ape you are. Hm...that company insignia..."

Tokinada looked upon the Ninth Company assistant captain insignia on Hisagi's arm with some surprise, then his face twisted with delight and pleasure.

“Ah, I see. I’ve only seen you on the footage, but I do recognize you. So the Soul Reaper that Aura spoke of in Karakura Town was you. Well then, so you went ahead and used the Tenkaiketchu, you vile thief?” In direct contrast to the tone of his words, he opened his arms wide as though he were actually welcoming Hisagi. “Then how about I answer your earlier question. You’re right, I *am* Tokinada Tsunayashiro. What an honor it is to meet a Soul Reaper with such a promising future, Assistant Captain Shuhei Hisagi.”

“...”

“Or should I put it like this...I am so pleased that you are penning an article in praise of me, Shuhei Hisagi, editor-in-chief of the *Seireitei Bulletin*. ”

“You...”

“What do you think? Won’t a description of how the fool Shunsui Kyoraku met his unsightly end while mounting an insurrection with Arrancars and Quincies make for an excellent article? If you’d like, you may even watch from a front-row seat. I may even tip you a coin, depending on how the article turns out.”

Just hearing these words that were dripping with sarcasm made Hisagi realize something.

The man in front of his eyes was an entirely different type of evil compared to Aizen and Yhwach. Since the incident with Tosen, Hisagi had been reluctant to speak of justice and evil as though they were simple dualisms, but Hisagi’s instincts told him this man named Tokinada was quite clearly *evil*.

He would occasionally encounter such people when covering the felons of the Soul Society—those who had not been warped by some pitiable past, but instead were villains from the outset. He keenly sensed a malice even darker than that from the few words Tokinada spoke.

It was clearly a problem that a man like this was the head of the Four Great Noble Clans, a position within the Soul Society that was on equal footing with the Central 46. And the fact that Kyoraku and

the others were confronting Tokinada indicated just how terrible a deed the man in front of him was trying to commit.

"I think the readers would enjoy an article about your downfall much more," Hisagi answered, spitting the words out as he reflexively reached for his zanpaku-to.

"Hm. But as an agent of the mass media, don't you think it's inappropriate to involve your personal grudge? As a bearer of news, shouldn't you be consistently impartial?"

"Even from an impartial perspective, from what I know about you I doubt you're a good person."

Though Hisagi had viewed Tokinada as an absolute enemy from the moment the man had attempted to kill Kyoraku and the others, he didn't attack Tokinada right away. There was something he needed to clear up first. "What are you planning on doing...with that Hikone kid?"

"Hm? You know Hikone?" Though Tokinada was initially dubious, he seemed to recall something and nodded. "Ah, come to think of it, Hikone did say something about that. They met a kind Soul Reaper at the Seyakuin or something of the sort."

"I'm asking you what you're planning on, making that kid into the Soul King."

"Does it matter? In order for Soul Reapers to rule over the three realms, we must have an absolute symbol to reestablish a new set of values in the world of the living and Hueco Mundo. Hikone is able to do that. They were *created* to do it. That is all—it's a simple matter."

At Tokinada's indifferent reply, Hisagi's rage was apparent in his words. "You use people like tools."

"That's a misconception. Hikone is indeed a tool, but I do not think that *people* are tools. I think of people as beings who think with their own free will, shout, scream, and let themselves fall into despair. I consider humans a truly comical show. A tool does not have its own will and instead entrusts itself entirely to my mind—that is a name for something that is *not a person*, such as Hikone."

“You...”

“It is a simple fact. Hikone is no person. Hikone is not a Hollow nor are they a Quincy or a Soul Reaper. They are nothing more than a tool I created—a vessel of power to unobtrusively become king and suppress the three realms. Naturally. But compared to those incompetent, ignorant fools, I do have a preference for Hikone.” A sarcastic smile broke on his face as he shrugged lightly and said what he truly thought. “That *thing* is too single-minded when it comes to emotions. If I told them to die, they would simply do it, and if I told them to crush their own lungs and suffer, they would happily pry their chest open using their own fingers. They are somewhat dull to toy with.”

Liltotto, who heard that from afar, clucked her tongue, remaining cautious of Complete Hypnosis, since she didn’t know when it could assault them. While feeling slightly concerned that the words she was hearing even now might be exercising the power of Complete Hypnosis, she muttered to herself, recalling an exchange from just a few hours earlier.

“So if your pal Tokinada ordered you to die a painful death, would you actually go and die?”

“Yes! And I’d do my best to suffer while I do it!”

“So the kid wasn’t speaking metaphorically. That’s nauseating.”

“Did you...actually order Hikone to do that?”

“What reason do I have to deceive you about something so trifling?”

Hisagi looked at Tokinada smiling down at him and desperately held back the growing rage within him as he said, “...Well, I give up. I’m running out of options other than killing you ASAP.”

“You never had that option in the first place, since you’re not capable of such a feat.” This phrasing seemed designed to make Hisagi feel like a fool. Tokinada then asked the Soul Reaper, with deep curiosity, “But I do not understand—you only just met Hikone once at the Seyakuin, did you not? Why are you so fixated on this?”

In fact, Hisagi had met Hikone earlier, so they had seen each other twice, but he purposefully did not correct Tokinada as he replied, "Even if I'd never met the kid before, how could I stand silently by after finding out what you're up to?"

"What? So then it's nothing more than what you'd call chivalry? Or is it compassion? Regardless, how idiotic." Tokinada responded disinterestedly, then went right on talking about Hikone. "If you're trying to save Hikone, you're misguided. The only way of life that thing knows happens to work out well for me. This is the result of my not teaching Hikone anything else, and also of Hikone never attempting to learn more. I never resorted to reward or punishment; that thing simply believes things are meant to be this way. Don't you think stealing Hikone's happiness would only serve your own sense of righteousness?"

Tokinada was the epitome of composure as he said this, and Hisagi then understood precisely the relationship between the being called Hikone and Tokinada. It wasn't a relationship of control through fear. It wasn't even a relationship of dependence through pleasure. Tokinada had simply used Hikone's innocence and ignorance to his advantage, making the child think that he was their entire world.

He hadn't made himself a god.

He had made Hikone the god and raised himself onto equal footing by becoming all they knew of the world.

How...?

Can that be the only rationale behind all this?

Biting back his anger, Hisagi released his zanpaku-to. "Reap, Kazeshini."

Gripping the zanpaku-to now in its shikai form, Hisagi readied himself, however...

Arriving in Hisagi's blind spot, Kyoraku grabbed the Soul Reaper's collar while still carrying Nanao under his arm. Kyoraku used the

hand that was still holding his own zanpaku-to to jerk Hisagi's collar forcefully, then leapt, pulling Hisagi away.

"Huh? Why...?! Wha...?!"

In the next moment, the sensation of solid ground under Hisagi's feet abruptly disappeared. He started to fall immediately, and his vision was seized by darkness.

Tokinada, who watched the whole thing transpire, looked at the flickering flames of the palace behind him. They were flames he himself had created earlier through his Ryujin Jakka. Next, he looked at the shadow it cast under his feet, which stretched out to the point in the distance that Hisagi and the others had disappeared to. A delighted smile broke on his face, and he muttered to himself, "Good grief, could you be more overprotective of your underlings? But are you sure about this, Kyoraku? You truly wish to entrust your last hope to a Soul Reaper such as him?"

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INSIDE THE SHADOW

"...Kyoka Suigetsu?!"

Hisagi, who had been dragged into the shadow world by Kageoni, the ability Katen Kyokotsu possessed, exclaimed in surprise after hearing what had been happening recently from Kyoraku and Nanao.

"Yes. We suffered an embarrassing blow. Other than Captain Zaraki, all of us saw the moment it was released... I think the Arrancars and Quincies must have also understood the ability immediately. Tokinada has been able to use as many zanpaku-to abilities as he desires while we're immobilized out of fear we'll attack each other."

When Hisagi looked closely, he saw that Kyoraku sported a wide variety of wounds; the Captain General had been burned, frostbitten, slashed, and even seemed to have had holes drilled into him.

Hisagi immediately realized that Tokinada had likely used Complete Hypnosis to make Kyoraku *misapprehend* the type of

attacks that assaulted him. If Tokinada's Ryujin Jakka were mistaken for Shinso, even if the target thought they had avoided the blow by a thin margin, they would still end up getting scorched. If it were the opposite, then because the person being attacked would be estimating the speed at which the flames spread, their body would end up cleaved by the lightning-fast strike.

Though Tokinada's other zanpaku-to abilities were not performing as efficiently as before—possibly because he was pouring most of his spiritual powers into Kyoka Suigetsu—still Kyoraku assessed that at this rate they would not be able to escape annihilation.

“Captain Zaraki himself has his hands full facing Hikone. And frankly, considering that the child has been battling him for so long, they must be just as much of a threat as Kyoka Suigetsu.”

“Then what should we do? How do we deal with such a depraved zanpaku-to?”

“Tokinada’s spiritual pressure is a far cry from Aizen’s. That’s why I think there must be a limit to his Complete Hypnosis abilities... But even without that power, he’s still a formidable opponent.”

“Yes, I can’t believe he has the ability to copy others’ zanpaku-to...” Nanao said, as Hisagi recalled Tokinada’s face with irritation. “We can’t assume that he can use every ability. He *is* the head of the Visual Department. It’s possible he can only use abilities he has witnessed himself.”

“Come to think of it, according to Aura, that woman who’s in league with him, he was supposedly watching the whole battle in the fake Karakura Town.”

“It seems he is well prepared then. The Visual Department was the first to report on Rukia and Ichigo too. Given those circumstances, I wouldn’t be surprised if he were secretly connected to Aizen.”

Although Kyoraku had suggested that troubling idea, he himself guessed that the possibility was slim. Had Aizen joined forces with

Tokinada or the Tsunayashiro family, Aizen would likely have elicited needless backlash from Kaname Tosen. Tosen might have been able to handle all of that, but there was no reason to rattle him on purpose. Either way, given Aizen's personality, had the Tsunayashiro family come into contact with him, it was very likely Aizen would have dealt with them in the same manner he had the previous Central 46.

"Well, regardless, we can't simply assume his powers have restrictions while we're confronting him. Especially since he is obviously the type of man who enjoys pretending he *cannot* do something, then at the last minute revealing to his opponent that he actually *can*, in order to make them despair."

"That's appalling."

"I really did you a terrible disservice asking you to write an article about him. If we survive this, I offer you all my apologies."

Though Kyoraku spoke in his usual tone, even Hisagi could see the man's wounds were not shallow. Kyoraku was likely putting on a show of acting like everything was normal in order to give Nanao peace of mind. But Nanao didn't have holes for eyes. Though she looked uneasy for a moment, she immediately gathered what Kyoraku intended and tried to put on a brave face, the sight of which made Hisagi's hands curl into fists.

"I'll kill him."

"Assistant Captain Hisagi, that's..."

"I know that I'm not strong enough. But I might be able to steal his zanpaku-to, at least."

Kyoraku stared into Hisagi's eyes. Though Hisagi spoke with confidence, it was clear he was frightened. However, when Kyoraku saw that Hisagi was willing to walk toward death while carrying that fear, the Captain General sighed and interjected with a question.

"Tell me...did your Shinoreijutsuin cohort still have compulsory battle drills by night?"

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“I know you can hear me, Kyoraku! How about you come out soon?”

In the flames that spread around him, Tokinada was surrounded by his own countless shadows as he raised his voice, looking the epitome of composure. “Do you intend to hide in the shadows until everything is over? If that is the case, I don’t mind. That way you can watch as the rebel army you hastily threw together meets its demise.”

Tokinada then turned his eyes to Yoruichi, who was close at hand. “I have an excellent idea. Shihoin princess, how about I use the zanpaku-to of the Fon family maiden who so yearns for you...and slaughter you with Suzumebachī’s power? But of course, I won’t let you have the second sting immediately. After I engrave the seal of death all over your body, I will take my time administering the Nigeki Kessatsu sting.”

“Sheesh, you’re even more tasteless than I thought.”

Though Yoruichi smiled fearlessly as she stood up, the wounds she had sustained were by no means superficial.

“This is my last bit of mercy. Then how about I make myself look like the user of the blade herself? I wonder what the girl’s face will look like when she learns it was Suzumebachī’s powers that made you disappear without a trace... Ha ha ha ha ha! I cannot help but anticipate it!”

“It’s pretty ironic that someone whose debased character, which would certainly cause his demise if this were a tale from a story scroll, can somehow get his hands on such power in the real world.”

“That’s how the world works though, isn’t it? Hm, or would you like me to take Kisuke Urahara’s form to—”

Tokinada paused in the middle of his sentence as he sensed spiritual pressure rising up from the shadow behind him. When he turned around, he saw Kyoraku, Nanao, and...

Hisagi, holding Kazeshini with his eyes closed.

Tokinada was bewildered for a moment, seeing their faces, but eventually his laughter burst out as though a dam had broken.

“Now, now, don’t make me laugh so hard, Kyoraku! Surely you don’t intend that to be your last hope?”

Seeing Hisagi, who stood in front of Tokinada with his eyes still closed, Tokinada easily understood what they intended. They were trying to ensure that Hisagi, who was not under the control of Complete Hypnosis, did not see Kyoka Suigetsu the moment it was in shikai form.

“Then again, I suppose that cannot be all you are planning.”

Looking at their surroundings, Tokinada imperceptibly braced himself.

I see. So you plan on using him as a detector.

The Soul Reaper Hisagi’s weapon was a type that could attack from a distance. They likely planned to have Hisagi attack Tokinada with it so Kyoraku and the others could use the position of Tokinada’s voice and spiritual pressure to confirm they were attacking not an ally mistaken for an enemy, but Tokinada himself.

How naive. In that case, I can overwrite his voice, form, and the trajectory of his attacks using Complete Hypnosis.

However, in order to fully reproduce those aspects of Hisagi, he needed some time to observe Hisagi’s voice and the way the Soul Reaper attacked. If any of it were even slightly off, Kyoraku would realize that and react. Tokinada had an absolute advantage because of Complete Hypnosis, but he did not let his guard down.

Though he would not let his guard down, he also determined he would not kill them immediately, but rather torment them to death. At first glance, his behavior seemed contradictory, but, exactly as expected, Tokinada did not relax his attention as he devoted his entire body and soul to the amusing task of bringing his enemies to the brink of a torturous death.

“Hope does not suit any of you. I will correct that posthaste.”

From within Hisagi's self-imposed darkness, Tokinada's voice rang clearly in his ears. The direction Tokinada's voice came from and the place Hisagi's spiritual pressure perception sensed Tokinada were in agreement, as the Soul Reaper steadily honed his awareness.

At Shinoreijutsuin, which was the foundational establishment for a Soul Reaper's education and could also be their gateway to success, they were taught several techniques to battle in the dark of a moonless night. Those techniques included creating light through kido and forging their night vision, but fundamentally, they had to learn to sharpen their spiritual pressure perceptions and reel in their opponent's Reiraku in order to battle.

Naturally, the trajectory of their attacks wasn't as accurate as when they could see, so that method was mainly used to gain distance from the opponent until they could reach a place with light. That was the theory of what they were taught, but at this moment the opponent Hisagi stood before was not some run-of-the-mill Hollow.

This was a formidable enemy whose spiritual pressure rivaled that of the Arrancars and captains, and one who carried Enra Kyoten, a zanpaku-to of endless strategies, as well. The fear of standing up against a powerful enemy who had Senbon Zakura at his disposal, alone and with one's eyes closed, was unfathomable. However, despite the fear he felt, Hisagi was strangely calm.

Did Captain Tosen fight under these conditions? No, right now I can still perceive light through my eyelids, but Captain Tosen probably didn't even have that...

He had heard that the fully blind Tosen had exhibited excellent hearing and spiritual pressure perceptions from a young age. Whether that was true or not, the former captain had trained both senses to perceive the clouds his friend saw in the night sky. When Hisagi recalled how Tosen had been able to sense all kinds of things the seeing could not, he found it plausible that Tosen truly had

sensed the movements of the clouds floating overhead, even while he was unable to see them.

Of course, Hisagi was not equipped with the senses of hearing, smell, or spiritual pressure perception to that degree of acuity. Though he could use those senses in a pinch, when it came to overcoming his fear in that darkness, Hisagi reminded himself that this was nothing compared to the “fear” that Tosen had felt. At the same time, Hisagi remembered Tosen’s words when the former captain had stabbed Hisagi’s abdomen at Aizen’s command.

“I do fear something. I’ve had the same fear for a hundred years. The fear of assimilating and dying as a Soul Reaper.”

That was the answer Tosen had given to Hisagi when he had asked why the former captain threw everything away for the sake of power, and what had made him so frightened. Then, after being dropped from a building, Hisagi had almost lost consciousness. But in his empty mind, the words Tosen had spoken to Komamura echoed as well.

“If someone were to join an organization for revenge and lose sight of his true purpose and become complacent in his new life, wouldn’t that be depraved? Then tell me what justice is!! To forgive the one who murdered a beloved friend? That certainly could be virtuous! It’s beautiful! Blindingly beautiful! But is virtue justice?! No!! To live a drawn-out life in peace without clearing the dead’s regrets is...vice!!”

That moment might have been the first time the man named Kaname Tosen had proclaimed his true thoughts. They were filled with endless rage, with fear certainly flitting in and out of view in their depths. The reason Hisagi remained conscious and was able to once again stand was perhaps because he heard that voice.

Tosen had lived on, continuing to carry that rage and fear, for a long while. Unable to abandon his fear or forget it, he had suffered as he continued to walk his path with it. What kind of terrible hell had that been for him? Why did Tosen have to suffer that fate?

The answer to the questions that had risen within Hisagi was right in front of the Soul Reaper's eyes: Tokinada Tsunayashiro...

...the originator of so much rage and fear that those emotions had upended Tosen's life.

With his eyes still closed, Hisagi turned to the place where he felt Tokinada's spiritual pressure and said, "Let me ask you one question."

"Hm? A commoner like you wishes to ask *me* a question? Oh! Is this one of those interviews for the *Seireitei Bulletin*? In that case I don't mind answering, especially for you."

Tokinada shrugged, provoking Hisagi, but the Soul Reaper hid his rage and fear as he asked, "You saw it too, didn't you? The fight between me and Captain Tosen in the world of the living?"

"Did you hear that from Aura or Hikone? Yes, that fight was a useful reference. I rewatched it many times. Although I did have to go to great lengths to sneak the surveillance spirit bugs in so the Department of Research and Development wouldn't catch on."

Tokinada spoke in a casual tone, and Hisagi had to quell his intense rage as he continued to question the man. "Then you should have seen it—Captain Tosen's last moments."

As he took a step forward, Hisagi's roiling heart nearly overflowed. "You heard it, didn't you—what Captain Tosen yelled?"

Then, as though he fully understood, Tokinada agreed and shook his head with a quiet expression. "Yes...that really was deplorable, what happened to him. I regret most of all that I could not be present there myself."

"What?"

"If only I had been there at the point that you pierced through his brain and Aizen *nebulized* him...I could have told him..."

Tokinada then narrowed his eyes, with a smile that was the incarnation of wickedness itself as he continued, "...that his friend's cries as she died were much more exquisite and disgraceful... That's all."

Rage overtook all the other emotions within Hisagi.

“You...!”

He’d been able to keep his eyes closed despite his outrage as a result of Tosen’s many lessons, which had permeated his body to the point that they were practically instinctual. Hisagi lightly anchored his sense of reason within the chain of “fear” as he threw one half of Kazeshini toward Tokinada.

Tokinada dodged the attack by a wide margin as he lured Hisagi further with his words. “His yells certainly resonated in my mind! They were so very comical and pitiful that I was almost moved enough to cry! After all the seeds of amusement I cultivated so splendidly, and then he rotted to oblivion without being able to so much as turn his blade on me! Ah, I suppose I should thank you, Shuhei Hisagi. After all, you brought down a traitor who didn’t understand his place and came after me!”

“Hgh!”

“If I were to say more...I did realize he had an axe to grind. I had no idea he had gone so far as to join forces with Aizen, but when Kisuke Urahara and the others were exiled, I was certain that Tosen was one of the true culprits. Well, it would have been such a chore, so I never did inform Central 46.”

When Hirako and Muguruma heard that, they both glared at Tokinada.

“I may not be able to do it now, but that just gives me one more reason to slap you down,” snarled Hirako.

Though they could barely move despite the severe wounds that had been inflicted by Senbon Sakura’s and Shinso’s abilities, it wasn’t as though they could act carelessly, due to Complete Hypnosis and the possibility of friendly fire.

Tokinada ignored Hirako’s grudging words and continued to taunt Hisagi. “There’s something you *should* thank me for. If nothing else, because Tosen was able to keep his rage hidden, he saved the

Ninth Company many times—sometimes their lives, sometimes their minds.”

Though Hisagi wanted to object, he really had been saved by Tosen, who had continued to hold onto his internal desire for revenge. That said, unable to agree with Tokinada’s words, Hisagi answered with another question. “Is that why you won’t teach Hikone anything?”

“Is there some problem with that?”

“That kid still knows nothing. All they can do when they come up against a wall is run away to the small world you showed them. Captain Tosen never would’ve allowed anyone to raise a kid in such a twisted way.”

“Don’t use another’s sense of justice as your own. Why don’t you rephrase that with your own thoughts?”

As though his interest had been piqued, Tokinada delighted in provoking Hisagi. The Soul Reaper kept his eyes closed, manipulating Kazeshini’s chain and trying to frame the area around Tokinada based on spiritual pressure.

When he confirmed that Tokinada’s spiritual pressure was avoiding that, Hisagi manipulated the rotating blade and continued speaking. “Okay, I will. You’re a coward. You teach a kid who hasn’t got a clue about anything to serve only your motives and raise them in this cramped world for your own convenience.”

Tokinada opened his eyes slightly wider, then let slip a snicker.

“To remain ignorant is to run. To refuse to teach is cowardice. Is that what you say as a Soul Reaper?”

At Tokinada’s strange phrasing, Hisagi replied in irritation, “What’re you talking about? You’re a Soul Reaper too.”

“I see! I see! You certainly are the editor of the *Seireitei Bulletin*, aren’t you?! How arrogant it is to expose someone’s personal secrets and believe that spreading them far and wide is justice!”

Tokinada moved far away from Hisagi and stood on the estate's half-destroyed roof as he fired off his invective in a voice meant to reach not only Hisagi, but also all the others who were there.

"None of you have the faintest idea *that we are all living atop the sins of just five individuals.*"

"Huh...?"

Perhaps he was using the power of a zanpaku-to, but while Tokinada did not yell, even speaking in a quiet tone his voice carried far enough to permeate the minds of those on the ground.

As Hisagi was perplexed in the darkness, Kyoraku's voice hit him from behind in response to Tokinada. "Good grief, are you intending to tell that fairy tale? We don't even know if it's true."

"Though it contains some exaggeration, it is a lesson that we, the Tsunayashiro family that rules history, have continued to protect. Someone with as sharp an intuition as you can tell from the scars carved into the foundations of the Soul Society whether it is a fairy tale or not, can't you?"

"You think too much of me, I'm just—"

In the middle of his sentence, Kyoraku disappeared.

According to the indications Kazeshini had given him, Kyoraku traversed the zanpaku-to's chain and closed the distance on Tokinada using shunpo.

"Oh! How impudent!"

Tokinada smiled boldly as he began his defense...

At that moment, Kyoraku was assaulted by an attack he hadn't been expecting at all.

"Is this...?"

It was a collection of patterns floating in the air. Several feelers emerged from them and sprang at Kyoraku. The Captain General narrowly dodged them, but as a result he abandoned his attack on Tokinada. Though the feelers pursued him further, Nanao, who had followed after Kyoraku, used a kido barrier to intercept them. Even

as it hit the strong kido wall and part of its form was sent scattering, the patterned whip started to eat away at the reishi itself.

When Kyoraku saw that, he murmured with a groan, “A zanpaku-to...? No, is this...a Fullbring?”

Then, as though in response, a shadow floated up next to Tokinada.

“You realized that it was a Fullbring immediately...you really are the Captain General of the Court Guards.”

“That voice... Is that you, Aura?”

Hearing Hisagi’s voice as the Soul Reaper kept his eyes shut, Kyoraku kept some distance and said, “Good grief, another challenger after we’ve gotten this far?”

Kyoraku let out a loud sigh, while Aura bowed her head deeply.

“I extend my sincere apologies for obstructing you.” Then she glanced toward Hisagi as she continued. “However... I would like Lord Shuhei Hisagi to hear the entirety of what Lord Tokinada has to say. Please, if you could somehow pardon me.”

“And why would that be, miss?”

Though he spoke in a light tone, Kyoraku searched for an opening in his opponent.

In response, Aura quietly smiled and said, “I believe that Lord Hisagi bears the professional duty to know the truth. He can perhaps serve as a good judge to determine whether the world Lord Tokinada seeks to create is right or wrong.”

“Me...?”

What is this? What is Aura trying to do?

Though Hisagi couldn’t see the woman’s smile, he understood that she wanted him to hear everything Tokinada had to say. However, not knowing the reason for that, Hisagi kept his eyes closed and tilted his head.

Is this just obfuscation to confuse me?

Though he was certainly curious about what Tokinada might say, he couldn't slack on his offense. Hisagi manipulated Kazeshini again and tried to attack in the direction of the spiritual pressure, but...

Shinso's blade, which stretched out faster than his spiritual pressure perceptions could detect, pierced Hisagi's shoulder.

"Guh...!"

A sharp pain assaulted Hisagi. The long-distance thrust that surpassed his spiritual pressure perception in speed made the fear eddying under his rage start to swell.

"Hasn't the thought crossed your mind before, Shuhei Hisagi?" Tokinada asked, as though mocking Hisagi's fear. "About whether Kaname Tosen, or rather, Sosuke Aizen, might have actually been right?"

"What are you saying?"

"Even if it was for revenge, can you really comprehend how someone as virtuous as Kaname Tosen would betray the Soul Society itself? Have you ever dedicated any part of that somewhat deficient brain of yours to considering why Sosuke Aizen detested the being called the Reio so much?"

Tokinada gripped the hilt of Kazeshini in order to evade it as it approached and pulled Hisagi along with the chain. "Or maybe I should put it this way..."

Tokinada braced his hand and started to yank Hisagi over. With a supremely sadistic smile, he laid things bare: "Have you considered why Kisuke Urahara would have made the Hogyoku, or what his motives were for doing so?"

He exposed the bowels of what could be perceived as the original sin that shaped the Soul Society's history.

"Huh? What are you talking about? He said that the Hogyoku is for removing the boundaries between Hollows, Soul Reapers, and konpaku to surpass the limits of growth..."

"For what reason would anyone need to do that? In those days, he did not even know about Aizen's rebellious inclinations, and no

being could have defeated Genryusai Shigekuni Yamamoto. What would he accomplish by making anyone more powerful?"

"That was...to stop the Quincy's attack..."

"In the end, you were able to survive without the Hogyoku. Although, to be completely accurate, it was likely that he would not have allowed the use of the Hogyoku."

Hisagi recalled the conversation between Aura and Urahara.

"If Ichigo Kurosaki were given a Hogyoku, the world would become very solid for sure. However, that is far from the result you're looking to achieve, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I lied. If I had given Mr. Kurosaki the Hogyoku, it would have been something entirely different, wouldn't it?"

Though he had not understood the meaning of the conversation at all at the time, now things were different. The nature of Hikone's spiritual pressure, which was so similar to Ichigo Kurosaki's... That Aura had said they would use the Hogyoku to make Hikone into the Soul King... All of these assorted elements connected within Hisagi, building to one hypothesis.

Then, as though he were giving the final hint, Tokinada spoke about the man who had been his former classmate. "The Reio's right arm that dwelled in Ukitake's body. Don't you think that was odd?"

"..."

"Why would the Reio's right arm have been lost? Had it dropped to the ground, why would he not have used Squad Zero to retrieve it?"

That was Mimihagi, the thing that had dwelled in Ukitake's body at a young age—in other words, the Reio's right arm. And then there was Pernida Parnkgjas, the one who had claimed that he was "always a Quincy"—in other words, the Reio's left arm.

The Reio's right arm controlled "stillness" and his left arm "advancement." In that case, what did that mean for the Reio who had lost both of those things? He neither stayed still nor advanced, simply existed in the place between stillness and motion.

What did Aizen say back then...?

When Ichigo Kurosaki first appeared in the Soul Society, the words that Aizen had left them with at the end of the rebellion, when Aizen informed them of his true motives... These words resurfaced in Hisagi's mind. The words Aizen said when Ukitake had asked, "Have you fallen?" seemed now to have a different meaning.

"No one ever stood atop the heavens before."

"Not you, or I, or the gods."

Why had he gone out of his way to specify "not you" to Ukitake? Maybe Aizen had known that a part of the Reio dwelled in Ukitake?

If that were the case, Ukitake *was* someone with the right to stand atop the heavens. Until now, Hisagi had thought that the "gods" not standing atop had meant that the Reio was ultimately a king rather than an almighty god. However, Aizen had gone on to speak these words: "But the unbearable vacancy of heaven's throne ends now."

In which case...

"The Reio...was dead...from the start?"

When Kyoraku heard Hisagi's whispered murmur, he quietly cast down his eye. Yoruichi did not let her expression change and stared on as Tokinada and Hisagi had their exchange. After a moment of silence, Tokinada smiled cynically and shook his head.

"Close. Very close. The thing they forced the name Soul King on indeed was not living. However, it was not dead either."

"What does that mean?!"

Even in a bewildered state, Hisagi's attacks did not weaken. He pulled on the sword that Tokinada held using his left arm, and he threw the other side of Kazeshini that he gripped in his right hand.

Tokinada sent that flying back using a morning-star-shaped zanpaku-to—Gegetsuburi—and replied to Hisagi's yell. "The Reio was a sacrificial goat. However, he did possess powers that were the equivalent of a god's."

"What...?"

"Before the world took on its current form... In a chaotic place where there was no border between life and death, there was an original protector who stood between the Hollows and humans for the first time. The Quincies, the Soul Reapers, and also the Fullbringers...it could be said that he is the ancestor of them all." Snickering, Tokinada continued. "He was a Quincy and also at the same time a Soul Reaper, and also just a normal person bearing countless abilities like a Fullbringer. He was the symbol of hope who ruled over all in the chaotic world."

Then, as a smile filled with noticeable pleasure warped his face, he told Hisagi of the dark side of the Soul Society. "These three realms were created by sacrificing that man who was both a devil and a savior..."

"...by the five people who are the ancestors of our Five Great Noble Clans—the five traitors."

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THE REIOKYU

"The founder of the Tsunayashiro clan was a powerful man who was yet more suspicious than any other." The Manako Osho spoke those words in front of the crystal that was sealed away by multiple layers of barriers.

Around him, the silent members of Squad Zero all lent an ear to his tale. The place they were was a throne and also an altar and was not only occupied by them, but also by the imperial guards who were new to protecting the temple. Many of the soldiers had met their end by way of Pernida and Yhwach's other royal guards, so they had needed to supplement the ranks with new ones.

But there was that throne and the godlike enemy Yhwach's remains sealed within it.

The newcomers who had been informed that this was the current Soul King had been considerably baffled by it. After seeing the strife in the Kyogoku, the Osho had likely thought this a fitting opportunity.

He had fetched Oh-Etsu from Hoohden, then he had gathered the soldiers who protected the Reiokyū—in other words, the only people who knew the secret that, at present, a Quincy's remains were being revered as the Soul King—and spoke of the Soul Society's past.

"In that age, in all of creation many things were ambiguous. There was no such thing as life or death, and without progress, there was no retreat. While it swayed to and fro, you see, this was a world where one could only wait for all things to chill over the course of ten thousand or even one hundred million years. Even becoming a Hollow was part of the circulation of reishi." Speaking in a matter-of-fact manner, the Osho recalled the world prior to the birth of Hueco Mundo or the world of the living.

"Eventually, however, the Hollows began to eat humans. At that point the circulation stopped. Had things gone on as they were, all the konpaku would have been reduced to one gigantic Menos and the entire world would have come to a halt. But how curious it was—as though the world were rejecting that outcome, suddenly a life was born. A life that could destroy the Hollows, turning them to reishi sand, and once again allowing the world to circulate."

"Was that...the first Soul King?" a new soldier unintentionally murmured.

As though believing they had been impertinent, the new soldier rushed to cover their own mouth, but the Osho paid it no mind and nodded at those words.

"Indeed. Others such as myself, with special abilities, had appeared, but the Reio was exceptional. It may even be said he had a power that was close to being almighty, omniscient and omnipotent."

Almost nostalgically, the Osho recalled the form of the past Reio who had long since disappeared from this throne.

"However, it was not as though the stagnation of the world had been averted by the simple act of destroying the Hollows. The Reio

continued in that way to protect the world that would have slowly melted into chaos."

Taking a step forward and stroking his beard, the Osho continued. "But there were those who did not believe that was a good world. Although they did not reach the level of the Reio, there were five people who possessed powerful abilities. ...They were the ancestors of the Five Great Noble Clans, the Shiba family included."

The Osho spoke.

Their motives were different.

The Tsunayashiro clan's ancestor feared that the power of destruction might someday be turned against him.

Another clan's ancestor believed a lid was needed to cover the pit that would later become known as "hell."

The Kuchiki clan's ancestor believed a new order was needed to guide the world into stability.

The Shihoin clan's ancestor believed that an even greater cycle of circulation was needed to progress the stagnant world forward.

The Shiba clan's ancestor believed that it was necessary to explore the route of purification rather than destruction for Hollows, as Hollows also had minds.

Curiously, their different motives led them to the same goal: to separate the current world. There would be a reishi world, a kishi world, and also a sand paradise that would be the destination of the Hollows both worlds produced. Or, alternatively, other forms of worlds might come to being, but what was most important was to have worlds with a clear distinction between life and death.

In order to make the separation of the three realms reality, they required the power of the man who had transcended everything.

"It is said that the Shiba clan's ancestor attempted to persuade him, but in that opening, the Tsunayashiro clan's ancestor sealed the Reio into a crystal. I did not view what had happened then firsthand, but everything that followed is the history of the Soul Society itself."

The man who would later be called the Soul King...

Using his almighty power as the linchpin, the five created the foundations of the new world: The Soul Society, the world of the living, and Hueco Mundo.

Souls were given a division between life and death, and through that cycle, the world moved on to a new stage.

At some point, those who were tasked with managing the world came to be known as...

The Soul Reapers.

“He may have seen no future where it was avoidable no matter how he struggled, or he may have detected some kind of hope in the new world; it is impossible to fathom his will...but the Reio, it seems, intentionally did not resist.”

At that point, the Osho cast his eyes down and returned to his telling. “However, the Tsunayashiro ancestor doubted even the Reio’s nonresistance. He was most frightened of the Reio using his powers to escape the seal and destroy them. And so, without letting the Reio live or die, they tossed him into a contradictory spiral of simultaneous, continuous life and death. They even tore away his right and left arms that ruled ‘stillness’ and ‘advancement.’”

The new soldiers held their breath while the members of Squad Zero, not including the Osho, remained silent, each with a unique expression on their face.

Then the Osho himself uttered a cruel fact in the same tone he might use to merely discuss the weather. “Well, that likely was not enough. With the Tsunayashiro leading them, several of the ancestors spent a great deal of time carving out the Reio’s heart, whittling away his legs, scraping out all of his internal organs and removing them from his body. They did this in order to carve away his power and to render him simply a convenient figurehead for their benefit.”

Taking in the Manako Osho’s words, Senjumaru Shutara, who had been silent until that time, smiled as he said, “Unable to have a voice over the governance or the economy, in a body that couldn’t so

much as exhale, much less incite rebellion, he continued to act as the linchpin for the Soul Reapers. Though they are the ancestors of the Soul Reapers, the deeds they committed to create a puppet ‘king’ for themselves truly run deep.”

At her words, which somehow seemed removed from the situation, the Osho nodded deeply; he then brought up another aspect of the story. “Yes, however, the Reio certainly had his own will. It might be appropriate to call it a ‘flow’ that essentially guided things over time... It was *because* he had a will that Ichigo Kurosaki and the others were called here. We felt it as well. It can be sensed by those whose bones are turned into Oken who have entrusted a part of their konpaku to the Reiokyū.”

In actuality, the Reio’s right and left arm each truly had exhibited their own wills and had returned to the Reiokyū in the end. The right arm that had long been worshipped by the Soul Society had done so to protect the world while the left arm had joined Yhwach as a natural-born Quincy seeking to return the world to how it was before. As though to agree with the Osho’s words, Tenjiro Kirinji let his long toothpick bob up and down as he spoke animatedly. “Right on! Well, can’t comment on his lineage, but the kid raised by the man from the Shiba family coming here under the Reio’s will is a pretty entertaining turn of fate! Ain’t it?!”

“Indeed. The Soul Reaper who was the ancestor of the Shiba clan opposed the Tsunayashiro clan continuing to forcibly seal the Reio away. ‘We must make known far and wide the sin we have committed and entrust our judgment to the world,’ the ancestor insisted. In addition, the Shiba ancestor had been searching for a technique to make their own body into a sacrifice in place of the Reio.”

“Oh-ho, sure seems like something a Shiba ancestor would do.”

“Mhmm. Those who persist in attempting to make themselves a sacrifice are in their own way the most self-indulgent kind. It seemed the Shiba ancestor was determined to become the linchpin

of the three realms, had convincing the Reio failed, regardless of whether they had the power to or not... But when you consider that it was because the Tsunayashiro ancestor attacked the Reio that the Shiba family bloodline persisted, it is a very ironic story.”

Kirio Hikifune’s plump, round shoulders shook as she spoke of the past nostalgically. “The Shiba family, you say...Kaien certainly did have that way about him.”

“Well, the Shiba ancestor was obscured from history by the Tsunayashiro family, and as a result, the remaining descendants ended up receiving a cold reception from the Five Great Noble Clans.”

At that point, the Osho sighed emotionally and looked up at the ceiling. “However, when a Shiba descendant who bore the right character—Ichigo Kurosaki—showed up and truly did possess the attributes to take the Reio’s place, I thought that was also fate. But seeing how that did not come to be, it seems the world might still need him.”

Though the Osho attempted to end his tale with a light tone, the newcomers among the holy soldiers looked to each other, and several of their faces seemed pale under their uniform masks. The members of Squad Zero realized this was to be expected, because the truth the Osho spoke of hinted at something...

To wit, the very history of the Soul Reapers...

...had been built upon a crime more cruel than murder, and they continued to commit that sin.

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THE KYOGOKU

“If Yhwach is the ancestor of the group called Quincy, then the Reio itself is the source of the Quincies’ powers. Whether the Reio left a child behind before he was sealed away or the power shredded away from the Reio took human shape and manifested itself, I do not know.”

Tokinada, who had coincidentally finished speaking of the Soul Society's past at the same time as the Osho, happily released Hisagi's Kazeshini. Calculating when the Soul Reaper would lose his balance, Tokinada flung the flames of Ryujin Jakka at Hisagi and tried to burn the Soul Reaper. Had Hisagi not sensed the heat instantly and realized that he needed to retreat, he likely would have been turned into charcoal.

What was dreadful was that, while his opponents were wary of Complete Hypnosis and thus had been passive, Tokinada continued to skillfully evade the attacks on him as he spoke. He wanted to see Hisagi's face in despair. Just for that reason, Tokinada had, in a show of eccentricity, put his life on the line, disclosing the past the Tsunayashiro family had held so tight. Everyone there understood it was specifically his nature that allowed him to employ such a strategy.

"Don't you think it is a humorous story, through and through? The Soul King you so desperately protected is the savior of humanity that my ancestor trapped. That means that Yhwach was trying to save his ancestor, or perhaps someone who should be called father. And the fate he needed saving from was isolation for one million years, unable to live or die!"

Speaking sonorously, Tokinada continued to swing his own shapeless Zanpaku-to.

Liltotto and the others saw an opening and released arrows, but they all missed Tokinada. The Arrancars' Ceros produced the same result.

Tokinada used Kyoka Suigetsu's ability to make them believe that human-shaped clods of dirt created through Tsuchinamazu were himself. When Hisagi was able to attack properly, they would be able to time their attacks with him to accurately grasp Tokinada's position, but as Hisagi had steadily sustained an increasing number of injuries and the frequency of his attacks had slowed, Tokinada just barely had to move in order to evade those attacks.

“Yhwach wanted to return the world to its original state and release his father through death. I do not know which was secondary to the other. However, as a result, Yhwach consumed the Reio’s body and is currently the lynchpin of the world in the Reio’s place. Don’t you think that is so ironic? Eh, Kyoraku?”

When he heard Tokinada, Kyoraku smiled slightly and exhaled slowly as though to show his composure despite being riddled with wounds.

“Well, one does wonder. Though it is slightly difficult for me to ascertain whether what you say is the truth or nonsense at the moment... And in practice, it’s irrelevant to our situation.”

“Don’t utter such transparent lies. You should know, with the position you are in right now, shouldn’t you? The information that Sosuke Aizen and Kisuke Urahara knew several hundred years ago—who would believe you that you did not know of it?”

“I don’t mind if you don’t believe me. The only thing that’s certain is that if I don’t stop you right now, the world of the living, the Soul Society, and Hueco Mundo will end up in total chaos.”

“No, the only thing that is certain is that you will all die here.” Tokinada, whose smile was full of joy, continued to provoke. “Hm, right! You Soul Reapers have no such thing as justice! Naturally, I don’t either! What we have here is the descendants of villains attempting to steal an encampment, and nothing more. If there were justice in this world, then it likely would have resided in Kaname Tosen himself!”

Tokinada swung his zanpaku-to again and created a large quantity of ice using Daiguren Hyorinmaru, which he broke in pieces using the gigantic blade of Ten Ken, and scattered a barrage of ice chunks across their field of vision.

He made them believe each of those glittering bits of ice were different attacks and, using the difficult-to-evade illusive blades, lambasted the wasteland that had been the courtyard.

In order to protect Kyoraku, Nanao continued to put up barriers that would defend against all kinds of attacks. By developing multiple kinds of barriers all at once, she depleted herself far more harshly than with any normal kido, and her spiritual power was close to bottoming out.

“Don’t worry about me, Nanao. Just focus on protecting yourself.”

At Kyoraku’s words, Nanao scowled and answered, “Prioritizing the Captain General is a given.”

“This isn’t official business right now. We’ve come here to fight under a personal grudge of sorts.”

“In that case, I need to protect you all the more.”

At Nanao’s breezy reply, Kyoraku’s expression became complex as he again gripped his zanpaku-to.

“But it’s starting to look like a free-for-all. Still, I would think there would be some kind of restriction on it...”

Not wanting to let the barriers Nanao had created go to waste, Kyoraku honed his senses and observed the reishi that flowed between Tokinada and his zanpaku-to.

He felt something off about Tokinada’s spiritual pressure.

“Hm? It couldn’t be.”

Kyoraku’s spiritual perception gathered that Tokinada’s spiritual pressure itself was changing, or not so much changing as degrading and degenerating, though very slowly.

“This...Tokinada...it can’t be that you’re shaving away at your own life force!?”

“Oh! You did well noticing that so quickly! Kha ha ha ha ha! Although, what else should I have expected from you?”

Tokinada spoke matter-of-factly and did not even attempt to keep that fact secret, almost as though he were claiming that such a thing was not a weakness.

“That is the reason why the previous head of the family did not want to carry this zanpaku-to. Enra Kyoten consumes its wielder’s life. The more it is used, the more it will continue to consume my

konpaku, and that konpaku will never return. It is a curse similar to the Ise family's Hakkyoken."

As though to protect Nanao from Tokinada, who smiled as he fixed a stare on her, Kyoraku took a step forward and queried the man he had once studied alongside. "I really do not understand. Are you really willing to go so far as to wager your life simply for your own gratification?"

"What meaning is there to a life which you do not risk for enjoyment? Even my wife died for her own sacrifice—or something like that. There is only one difference—whether it was virtuous or not. That is the only minute difference there is to society."

The head of the Tsunayashiro family was given the duty of ruling history and keeping the treasured sword, generation after generation. However, most who learned of the treasured sword's peculiarity would relinquish it in that moment, in fear of death. Those who could master it would be proud to wield the venerable Enra Kyoten, which boasted power without peer. But the head of the family could overpower other Soul Reapers simply through political influence, without even needing to use Enra Kyoten. Furthermore, the family was in a position to leave the Hollows and Quincies to the Court Guards, so there had not been many who had willingly pared away their own life in order to use the sword.

Since they also could not allow it to be stolen by the other families, they had continued to seal it away in a secret depository that only the head of family was privy to. However, after that cycle had repeated through the generations, an outlier named Tokinada had appeared. The treasonous agitator who did not fear his own death in the slightest had stolen that zanpaku-to while the previous head of family was still alive. He did not do so for his own dignity, his own morality, or for the sake of another, much less the sake of the world itself; he simply risked his own life for the sake of pleasure.

He was different from Kenpachi, who wagered everything he had in order to whittle away his own life alongside his opponent in battle. Tokinada was an aberration who wouldn't mind sacrificing a year of his own life in order to ridicule the weak for a century.

It was this essential part of Tokinada's nature that made him able to master that cursed zanpaku-to with no scruples, and this was why he was now able to stand in Kyoraku and the others' way using Enra Kyoten as the supreme, unyielding, and indestructible zanpaku-to it truly was.

However...

As those around him were solely focused on defending themselves, a single man was steadily regaining his composure. Kaname Tosen's name had been used, which was one way of incurring his wrath, but regardless of that that man moved calmly as he read the spiritual pressure of Tokinada's attacks and narrowly dodged each one of them.

As though Tokinada himself had noticed that the purposefulness of the man's movements had returned, he asked the man, Shuhei Hisagi, whose eyes were still closed, "You're very quiet... Why don't you speak up, Shuhei Hisagi? I am speaking about the 'truth' that you so love."

"..."

In response to Tokinada's question, the Soul Reaper simply answered with silence.

"What a dull fellow you are. Is your brain not able to comprehend the truth that I thrust before it? I expected at the very least you would cry and shout about Kaname Tosen, as you seem to cling to the man so."

In spite of Tokinada's words, Hisagi remained composed. Had he heard such words under normal circumstances, he might have shouted out, "That's nonsense," and succumbed to his rage. However, the fear that accompanied the darkness of Hisagi's closed eyes kept his mind calm. In this situation of having intentionally

shuttered his vision, the tale Tokinada told about his raison d'etre brought something from Hisagi's past back into his present mind.

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THE PAST, THE SOUL SOCIETY

The darkness was present.

In that place not a ray of light, no sound, no smell, not even the faintest quiver of spiritual pressure existed—the space was dominated by endless darkness and silence.

Reflexively swallowing his saliva, he only felt his throat move—no sound was produced by the action. He shivered and felt his teeth occasionally grinding together, but of course, he sensed nothing but the tactility of that action.

To Shuhei Hisagi at that moment, the world had contracted to consist only of the pressure under his feet and the feeling of his zanpaku-to gripped in his hand.

Hisagi wondered whether the Muken that he had heard rumors of was a place like this and thought that the criminals who had been trapped in such a place would surely have broken before even a day passed. Hisagi made that abrupt conjecture because he instinctively understood that if he did not think of something, he would end up crushed by his fear.

Just how long would this hell of nothingness go on?

He felt like he could hear something behind him.

However, he only *felt* as though he had heard something.

In actuality the soundlessness had continued, but Hisagi could not help but feel that there was something there.

A monster.

A monster vastly more frightening than any Hollow was immediately behind him, opening its huge maw.

A memory of his old friend's death came into his mind.

In the next moment, the face of his friend's corpse was replaced with his own...

Before he realized it, he had swung his zanpaku-to around toward his back.

However, he wasn't able to complete the swing.

Hisagi started to shout, believing there really was some kind of monster there, but...

The darkness suddenly cleared.

"Huh..."

Abruptly, all his senses returned and Hisagi remembered. This was the Soul Society at midday, and he was in a forest within the Rukongai that few people approached. And he realized what had stopped his blade was the blade of his captain—his superior officer—at which point he quickly lowered his arms.

"...Captain Tosen."

He was soaked with sweat, and slightly delayed, his heart started thumping fast.

The light returned, the sound returned, the smells returned, and Hisagi was surrounded by the feeling of being alive.

"I determined that any longer would be dangerous. First, steady your breathing."

"...I'm sorry. My actions were shameful."

Though Hisagi lowered his head and gasped for breath, Tosen, who stood before him, quietly shook his head.

"There is nothing to apologize for or feel embarrassed about. If your senses are abruptly stolen, it's natural to feel fear. As someone who never had light to begin with, I lost the ability to even move when my hearing was blocked."

"How long was I...in the darkness?"

"Not even a half hour has passed."

Hearing those words, Hisagi, who was convinced that it had been several hours, was once again mortified by his own inexperience. When he looked up reflexively, the black curtain that had been created over the forest before him collapsed and converged into the zanpaku-to blade Tosen held.

“Is this your bankai, Captain?”

“Suzumushi Tsuishiki, Enma Korogi. That is my bankai’s name.”

What Kaname Tosen first revealed to Hisagi after the Soul Reaper had been appointed assistant captain was his bankai. Normally, one would not share the secret of their bankai so easily with another. No matter how powerful a bankai was, to recklessly allow it to be recognized might eventually become the cause of one’s defeat. That Tosen, who was normally so guarded, would purposefully show Hisagi his bankai, was so that Hisagi could be taught the true nature of *fear*, Tosen had told him.

Though he felt ashamed that was the only reason he was being shown the bankai, Hisagi also felt hope that his captain had that degree of trust in him. However, what Tosen said next made Hisagi embarrassed for himself.

“You certainly do have fear within yourself. However, I still do not sense fear from your sword and your words.”

With Tosen’s straightforward statement, Hisagi hung his head. He understood his own immaturity. He feared only the darkness and had swung his sword blindly. He compulsively brandished his power in order to dispel and shake off his fear. He was far from reaching the level of Tosen, who fought while allowing the fear to lurk within him.

As Hisagi silently wallowed, Tosen said in a steady tone, “Fear takes many forms.”

Tosen put his zanpaku-to into its sheath and turned toward the sky. It was almost as though his eyes, though unseeing, were following the clouds flowing by.

“The jet-black world you just experienced would provoke fear in anyone. Whether someone knows no light or sound from the start, when a person is born, and when they realize there is a world they did not know about, they will feel fear just the same. Someone who does not fear that in the slightest wouldn’t be human, or Soul Reaper or Hollow; they would be a monster from a place unfamiliar to us.”

"A monster?"

"One who does not know fear will eventually become a monster. The more you and I abandon our fear, the more we move away from being warriors, and the more we approach becoming heartless metastases. That is something you should not forget."



"I don't think that would happen to you, Captain Tosen."

To Hisagi, Tosen was perfect as a warrior and as a Soul Reaper. It would have been one thing for this to happen to someone inexperienced like Hisagi, but if Tosen abandoned his fear, it would

only have been because he had conquered it. There was no possibility that his actions would ever lead down the incorrect path, Hisagi thought at the time.

But then Tosen spoke as though admonishing Hisagi and even himself. "I do not know the light. Nor do I see the colors that delineate the world."

"Captain...?"



"If a time comes when I learn about those things, and I see only hope and pleasure in the remade world, and I forget my fear—at that time, perhaps, I will stop being a warrior."

Tosen turned his sightless eyes toward Hisagi and expressed simply the words that had been confined within his soul. "We must continue to carry our fear of the path we walk, our pride as Soul Reapers, and we must protect the world itself. Because when we have a path we have yet to know, pride we have yet to learn, and a world we have yet to experience in front of us, we cannot expect that the ground we stand upon will be peaceful forever."

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PRESENT DAY, THE KYOGOKU

The world that Kaname Tosen had decided was evil...

Hisagi thought that his mind had accepted it but that his heart had not.

Why did Captain Tosen despise Soul Reapers to such an extent?

It wasn't just Tokinada Tsunayashiro individually, but the existence of Soul Reapers themselves that he hated.

Realizing that answer was in the sin that Tokinada spoke of, Hisagi muttered to himself, "I wasn't afraid of anything... I didn't understand anything."

"Hm? What are you going on about?" Tokinada was deeply curious when the Soul Reaper finally spoke, not understanding the meaning of the words coming from Hisagi's mouth.

However, instead of answering Tokinada's question, Hisagi continued to fire off those words with anger clearly directed at himself. "I was always convinced that I was right. That was why I went into the fight with the resolve to open Captain Tosen's eyes."

Tosen's words were revived in Hisagi's mind, words he spoke when the man had stood in his way as Aizen's retainer.

"You haven't changed at all. Even in those words of yours, there wasn't a hint of fear lurking in them."

They were words that he had recalled earlier when he was speaking with Tessai in Karakura Town as well.

However, they struck Hisagi's heart with a different significance now.

I might be the one who's actually wrong. It might be my sense of justice and the world that I'm standing in that's wrong. I never even thought of that possibility. I thought Captain Tosen had just been tempted by Aizen.

Someone who does not fear the blade they swing has no right to fight.

Tosen always said that. That blade wasn't just a zanpaku-to. Tosen likened the justice itself he brandished to a blade. What Tokinada said was likely the truth. There was no reason for him to lie now, and it was consistent with what Aizen had said. Then, most of all, it was more than enough of an answer as to why Tosen had determined the Soul Society itself was evil.

Kaname Tosen had despised Soul Reapers and the Soul Society because the existence of the former and the history of the latter were themselves a betrayal of the wishes of Tosen's own friend.

It wasn't Tokinada individually.

The Soul Society's "justice," which covered the world in clouds that could never be cleared, yet continued to give the false hope that the clouds could be dispersed, might have been Kaname Tosen's true enemy.

I wasn't scared of the Soul Reapers' and Court Guards' justice in the slightest. And the only reason I wasn't was because I believed in the Soul Reapers' justice! While Captain Tosen went on this whole time carrying his fear...

"If I really feared fighting, then why did I...? Why didn't I try to hear Captain Tosen out? I just kept spewing nonsense about how I was going to 'open his eyes'!"

As Hisagi spoke out loud in frustration and Tokinada listened, Tokinada's expression was permeated with joy, as though he had finally been released from his tedium.

"Ah! I see! So you're regretful then? Because without knowing what Kaname Tosen's true feelings were, you shamelessly insisted that you were an ally of justice! Then what will you do about it? Do

you wish to rewind time? Would you return to the middle of the fight, shedding tears as you join Tosen's side under Aizen?"

Tokinada continued deliberately, as though tormenting an ant by plucking off its legs.

Ultimately, Hisagi did not turn the brunt of his words at himself, but at Tokinada.

"But I still don't intend to claim that Captain Tosen was right. Even if everything you said was true...regardless of that, I would still probably stand in Tosen's way."

"Hm... Then how about we try to reproduce that?"

Then Tokinada drew a new power from Enra Kyoten.

"What do you think you really accomplished back then? The justice that Tosen adhered to was itself pure. Don't you think that when faced with that, your justice and your textbook truths are flimsy?"

He shot toward Hisagi countless blades that separated into long, needle-like shapes.

"Suzumushi Nishiki, Beni Hiko."

In order to provoke Hisagi, Tokinada had brazenly used Tosen's—and also his own former wife Kakyo's—zanpaku-to power.

However...

The jet-black chain that connected the two blades of Kazeshini swept aside the countless blades with precision.

"What?"

It was almost as though his eyes had seen them all—no, even if he had been able to see them, Hisagi had manipulated the chain in a way that usually would have been impossible for him. Seeing that made Tokinada's grin disappear.

Then, with a transparent hostility that had not been apparent in his words until then, Hisagi said, "Don't talk about justice."

Did he have the right to condemn Tokinada? While accepting that he would walk a path alongside that fear itself, Hisagi wagered his own fate as he challenged Tokinada.

“A bastard like you who hasn’t got any fear of death...has no right to talk about Captain Tosen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“HA HA HA! I SEE! I SEE! It seems your swipes at me have reached a new level of refinement! How entertaining!”

It was not just the speed that had changed. Faced with Kazeshini’s discernibly increasing accuracy with each successive throw, Tokinada was still delighted and smiling as he continued to dodge every attack. Tokinada accurately saw through the angle and force with which Kazeshini flew as well as the shifting contortions of the chain. Reacting to those, he responded to them by calling upon various forms and abilities of zanpaku-to swords.

However, Kazeshini’s speed continued to increase until Tokinada was trapped in a cramped space barely the size of a tatami mat. The intervals between swipes contracted until he could hardly step a foot out of that range. The way in which Hisagi manipulated the revolving sickles using the chain and the technique with which he trapped Tokinada without binding the man’s body were like a perfect demonstration of martial arts skills.

Though Tokinada attempted to immobilize the zanpaku-to, cutting it using Wabisuke to multiply its weight, the moment he attempted to manifest that blade, Kazeshini writhed like a living animal with its own will and evaded the attack by a paper-thin margin.

Can he see then?

Tokinada was dubious. In order to test his theory, he created a wall of flames between him and Hisagi using Ryujin Jakka and then tried to cut the blade with Wabisuke, but of course the result was the same.

I suppose that the flames aren’t strong enough to melt a zanpaku-to with my spiritual pressure. Even if I dedicated the entirety of my spiritual pressure toward doing that, I wouldn’t be able to raise the temperature to that point.

Tokinada looked at Kazeshini’s blade as it cut through the wall of flames. As he fully grasped that Hisagi really was perceiving his

movements through spiritual pressure perception alone, it also sank in that his spiritual pressure would never reach anywhere near Genryusai Yamamoto's. Had he been able to use Genryusai Yamamoto's actual Ryujin Jakka, he could have burned everything away with a heat strong enough to evaporate even a zanpaku-to; the whole matter would have been resolved using that single ability, without any reliance on Complete Hypnosis.

Still, I need to deal with him before all the riffraff around here recover.

If he dedicated enough spiritual pressure to his attack to burn all of them in an instant, he would have to decrease the spiritual pressure he was putting into Complete Hypnosis by an equal amount, and it was possible that would end up creating an opening he couldn't control.

The scales began to quiver in Tokinada's mind.

He supposed he needed to consider whether to deliberately torture all of them to death, as he had been doing thus far, or first kill 80 percent of his enemies in order to cause Kyoraku despair. As for Kenpachi, if Hikone were to end up at a disadvantage he could simply have Aura, who was not susceptible to physical attacks, deal with him. If Tokinada were the type of man who would choose to kill them all instantly, he likely wouldn't have even thought up this foolish plan to begin with. Because Tokinada's wish wasn't to abandon everything he had to fulfill some great moral cause, but simply to fill the twisted vessel of his own heart with amusement.

However, Tokinada also didn't wish to lower his guard and allow them to launch a counterattack on him. As Hisagi's attacks had become more intense, the offense from those around him had also steadily increased in momentum. The Quincies' arrows and the Arrancars' Ceros followed Kazeshini's attacks. Bringing out the abilities of the zanpaku-to to counter them, Tokinada parried or canceled each one, or occasionally sent them flying back to his opponent.

I see. He's just an assistant captain, so how can he be so...

When Tokinada realized that Kazeshini's throwing maneuvers were faster in speed than they had previously been in the footage Tokinada had seen, he attempted to amend several of his strategies. However, before he could even produce another zanpaku-to ability, the next blow would come down on him.

Hm...? Is he becoming even faster?

As Tokinada determined that his opponent was someone he could not let his guard down around at all, he imagined the moment he would make his powerful opponent submit, letting his mouth soften as he let Senbon Sakura expand around him...

In the next moment, everyone around saw it.

Even as it was scraped by the blizzard of blades, Kazeshini flicked everything away with its abnormally powerful rotations. Then, from a gap that had been wrenched open through Senbon Sakura, the second sickle closed in on Tokinada...

That was the moment that Tokinada's right arm, which held Enra Kyoten, was severed and flung high into the air.

"Guh...?!"

"Lord Tokinada...?"

As Tokinada cried out in pain, Aura's eyes widened.

"Impossible... How could he break through Senbon Sakura's wall?!"

At the same time that his agonized cries rang out, the wall Senbon Sakura had formed around Tokinada and Aura disappeared like smoke, revealing a scene of Tokinada holding the end of his elbow. Those surrounding all began to make their moves at once, as though this were their once-in-a-lifetime chance.

"Hah! You didn't just drop your zanpaku-to—you dropped your entire arm! Pathetic!"

The impetus of Candice promptly driving a Galvano Javelin at Tokinada allowed the Quincies' Heilig Pfeil to pierce through him as well, and Grimmjow enveloped his body in a Cero.

"Once they start to crumble, it's over way too soon."

As Madarame watched Tokinada's broken body collapse on the ground, he shouldered the long shaft of Hozukimaru and looked disappointed.

"Well, even if he could use the same zanpaku-to, he still just wasn't on Aizen's level," Yumichika murmured, though he didn't let his guard down.

Though they had also endured severe wounds, they remained combat-ready through sheer willpower. Tokinada had collapsed, but the mysterious woman who seemed to be a Fullbringer was still going strong.

As the Soul Reapers in front of him surrounded and blocked Aura, Hisagi desperately steadied his breathing in order to calm his thumping heart. Perhaps in reaction to the fact that he had continued to manipulate Kazeshini at a pace that was beyond his limit, Hisagi's spiritual pressure seemed to billow inside of him until he felt as though all the cells in his entire body were going to rip open.

"Did we...do it?"

Feeling that Tokinada's spiritual pressure, which had been present until just a moment ago, had vanished, Hisagi lowered his shoulders in relief.

However, a lingering gloom remained in his heart. He had let himself fall into the maelstrom of revenge in the end, hadn't he? All he had done was kill the man who had caused Tosen despair and who, out of sheer hatred, had stolen the former captain's life.

...I haven't got time to think. I need to do something about Aura and Hikone...

Hisagi forcibly changed his mood, but...

"What you have isn't hate."

Suddenly, these words he had heard in the past repeated in his head.

"All you have is sentimentality for Kaname Tosen and what he left behind after he disappeared."

Whose words were those?

"You would do well to remember this..."

"Regardless of whether you have strong resolve—"

Perhaps those recollections were being revived in his mind by Hisagi's accumulated experiences as a Soul Reaper, in order to serve as a warning.

Back in reality, Muguruma's angry shout reached Hisagi's ears.

"Whoa! Hey! Careful, Shuhei! The woman went that way!"

Oh! Did he mean Aura?!

Aura's spiritual pressure was scarce, so he couldn't sense her using his spiritual pressure perception. In order to grasp her movements, he opened his eyes in a fluster. As he did so, he remembered the last fragment of the words that had just been reverberating in his mind.

"You cannot defeat the strong simply through sentimentality."

Hisagi realized those had been Aizen's words...

...and as he slowly opened his eyes, the blade in front of him shattered almost simultaneously.

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"Huh?!"

At the same time that Kyoka Suigetsu's shikai activated in front of Hisagi's eyes, the world that had been shown in Muguruma's and Yoruichi's eyes shattered, exposing the state of reality. Tokinada's body, which had been crumpled until that point, and Aura's body had switched places. Aura, who had been standing in front of Hisagi, had turned into Tokinada.

Looking at Tokinada, who was wearing a strange coat, Yoruichi clucked her tongue.

"A spiritual pressure interception cloak!"

When she saw the cloak that Kisuke Urahara had developed, she immediately realized what had happened. The moment that

Tokinada had enveloped them in Senbon Zakura, he had changed places with Aura and invoked Complete Hypnosis. He had made them believe he was Aura and she was him. He made Kazeshini cut through an earthen clump created using Tsuchinamazu and cried out in anguish at the same time but had never actually let go of his sword, not even for a moment.

Then he had made the others believe they saw Aura approaching Hisagi, in order to make them warn him.

While Hisagi continued to stand there in shock, Aura, who had been pretending to be Tokinada crumpled on the ground, slowly stood up.

“That was a terrible thing you did, Lord Tokinada.”

Aura, who really had been on the receiving end of all kinds of attacks from those around her, was entirely unharmed down to her clothes.

“You can’t be hurt by any cuts or Ceros anyway. Don’t complain when all I did was use you as a dummy.” Tokinada’s words reverberated in Hisagi’s ears.

Looking into Hisagi’s eyes, Tokinada said happily, “Good grief, what a pity it is that all your friends are such simpletons.”

Returning to Aura’s side, Tokinada once again swung the flaming blade of Ryujin Jakka and kept those around who had begun to approach him in check.

Snickering, he fired off words deliberately chosen to provoke Hisagi. “Aizen would have easily seen through a trap like this. No, if you just had the prudence of Tosen, he wouldn’t have said anything careless enough to cause you to open your eyes.”

Then he looked up at Kenpachi and Hikone, who were continuing their fierce clash of swords in the sky, and he said to Aura next to him, “Well then, there’s no issue if Hikone can defeat *the Kenpachi* with their own abilities, but...I suppose I’ll kill everyone here first. Or perhaps I should leave that reporter as a living witness?” Tokinada shrugged, and then, as though another thought had

abruptly come to mind, he asked about something else. “Come to think of it, what happened to the Fullbringlers that I left to you? I thought Kugo Ginjo was also here?”

“Oh, but you *are* you. I thought you already knew what happened to them.”

“Based on the reports from the surveillance spirit bugs’ mock brains, I know they seemed to have fought each other, but...what trick did you use to cause that?”

“It was President Yukio’s abilities—after I amplified his powers.”

Static noise ran through the air behind Aura, and a boy showed his face.

“It was a piece of cake. I stuck a virus into my ‘past,’ and when Tsukishima stuck his bookmark in me, I hacked him instead.”

“Oh, so your Fullbring is that powerful then, boy?”

“As long as I’ve got the resources, modding a program is like breathing to me. After that, I just had Tsukishima stick the same virus in the other two.”

As though to prove his words, Ginjo and the others appeared from the static one after another. It was almost as though they had lost their emotions. When he saw them stand expressionlessly like dolls, Tokinada smiled happily.

“I see, I see. He had been a close candidate for the Soul King after Ichigo Kurosaki. At minimum, he will likely be of assistance to the linchpin that maintains the three realms.”

Tokinada slowly turned his zanpaku-to hilt toward Ginjo and the others. The surrounding Soul Reapers, Arrancars, and Quincies were being restrained once again by the remanifested Gagaku Kairo horde’s automatic predatory abilities.

“Just in case, I’m going to show them Kyoka Suigetsu’s shikai. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all, please go ahead.”

Aura bowed elegantly as she spoke, and Tokinada attempted to invoke his Kyoka Suigetsu’s shikai, but...

“Hm...?”

It would not invoke.

He scowled, and in the momentary opening when he looked at his own hand...

Ginjo had more than enough opportunity to make a move.

Without a word, he unleashed a blow, seeming to have unsheathed a sword with the most minimal of movements.

The Cross of Scaffold.

The necklace charm that he gripped in his hand instantly transformed into a longsword that he used to dispatch a slashing attack like that of Zangetsu’s.

Tokinada attempted to receive that blow using a Zangetsu himself...

...but the newly created Zangetsu blade broke to smithereens when faced with Ginjo’s attack, which simply slashed right across Tokinada’s torso.

“What is with you? You’re way sturdier than I thought you’d be.”

Though Ginjo had unleashed a blow with enough force that he thought it should have bisected the Soul Reaper, Tokinada’s spiritual pressure might have been greater than he had imagined, since the wound stopped right above the man’s ribs.

Tokinada, who had been unable to use Zangetsu, healed his wound using Hisagomaru as he muttered to himself, “Good grief, it seems that Enra Kyoten can only depict Zangetsu’s outer form, considering the sword has a special origin.”

“Even if you used the real deal, I would’ve won against a swordsman like you.”

With his usual daring smile on his face, Ginjo squeezed his longsword in his hand.

Though Tokinada attempted to invoke Kyoka Suigetsu’s shikai again, it was as though it were being blocked, and he could not make it shatter into the form.

"Do you remember the method in which Kyoka Suigetsu can be rendered powerless?" Aura's monotone voice spilled from her smiling face.

Kyoka Suigetsu was a zanpaku-to of absolute superior power once it was invoked. However, it had a weakness as a result of that. If the target were to touch the blade before it was invoked, then Complete Hypnosis could not be implemented.

Had Tokinada been Aizen, he might have been able to fulfill the conditions of having those around him see the shikai the moment it was invoked. However, now that someone other than Aizen was using the blade, another weakness was involved. Tokinada's spiritual pressure was nowhere near Aizen's level, and because of that, it was possible for the shikai transformation itself to be sealed through incredibly strong spiritual pressure.

Then again, there were very few who had spiritual pressure that exceeded Tokinada's and who could also skillfully perform such a feat. Because of that, he took his time creating an opening to show the powerhouses Kyoraku and Yoruichi his shikai.

There were a limited number of people in that place who had spiritual pressure comparable to or exceeding Tokinada's who also were not under the effects of Complete Hypnosis. There was Hikone Ubuginu, Kenpachi Zaraki, Kugo Ginjo...

...and Aura Michibane.

The moment he turned his eyes to her, she had already finished her work. At the same time he felt himself being put under restraints, he also felt something else coming from Enra Kyoten, which he gripped. He realized that, at that moment, every single one of the many different blades that were manifested in that place were being touched by something.

"She's attacking her own people? Why...?"

Nanao saw one of the patterned tentacles that had just blocked Kyoraku's attack twist itself around Tokinada's entire body.

“Don’t let your guard down. This might also be an illusion that Complete Hypnosis is creating.”

Tokinada and Aura stood between the still quivering flames from earlier, and after looking at Ginjo and the others, Kyoraku narrowed his eyes as he quietly said, “Even if it isn’t just an illusion, we probably should not allow ourselves to be seized by optimism.”

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Aura Michibane was missing something.

If asked what it was she was missing, she could not answer that question. If Hollows acted in order to fill the hole in their chest, Aura herself did not even have a desire to fill anything.

Love.

That was the emotion she was missing.

She had no interest in anything, and since her childhood she spent her days intently carrying out the orders given by those around her. She had no attachment to the world whatsoever; even when she recalled the days she had spent with her father, shut away in the room that was like a glass jar, she still had no deep emotions, even to this day.

Because she had no attachments, she had no hopes; conversely, she did not have the despair to wish to die of her own accord either. In the complex system of the world, she spent her days spinning like a cog. She had thought she was fine with that. She thought she was fine simply adjusting to fit the flow of others and continuing to turn until her body rotted away.

The event that had created a change in that “cog” occurred just half a year earlier.

When she had been ordered by Tokinada to put together all kinds of konpaku and body fragments in order to create a Soul Reaper, no emotion or disgust rose from within her. However, even for her, to take the elements of Soul Reapers and Quincies that normally clashed, as well as peculiar components called Fragments of the

Reio, and to put them together to create a life was a nearly impossible endeavor.

The project had sustained her concentration in a way that had never happened before in her life, and finally, at the moment the *thing* created spiritual pressure, which could be said to be a Soul Reaper's pulse of life...

She realized that she was smiling.

It wasn't a smile of relief that she had managed to bring safely to life the work she had been given. Instead, she felt unconditional love for the new life she had created with her very own hands.

The woman who had been only a cog had become someone who could create. That was perhaps the moment she truly took a step out of the glass case. At the same time, that moment was when she learned about fear.

From her own common sense, she knew this life could hardly be said to be a proper being. She knew that it was commonly accepted that lives were equal, but in the Soul Society, where the aristocratic system was celebrated, that way of thinking would not hold up.

Aura realized that because, for some time, she had known...

She knew how Tokinada Tsunayashiro planned to use this life.

All this being would do was reign over the world in the place of the Soul King. When she was faced with the reality that the life she had created was simply meant to execute Tokinada's orders and, as the "next Soul King," act as fuel to make the system that made the three realms, the Soul Society, the world of the living, and Hueco Mundo, continue, Aura's world completely changed.

Or, it may be more appropriate to say the blank sheet her world had been until then started to gain color.

After some time, when the Soul Reaper who had been named Hikone called out to Aura with their own voice, it became even more obvious.

"You're Ms. Aura, aren't you?! Lord Tokinada told me that you're almost like a mother to me! I don't really know what a mother is, but it's nice to meet you!"

Their eyes were innocent and contained not even the slightest hint of ill will. She realized they were the same eyes she saw in her own face when she had stared at the glass wall during the days of her youth. She realized that time had filled her heart, and that, in the past, she had been happy living her days locked away in that place with her father.

But had that really been *right*?

At this point, she couldn't know whether her father had confined her out of parental love, a desire for control, or possibly for some other reason entirely. Something she hadn't considered even after she had entered the outside world was now being thrust at her. At the same time she learned about love, she realized the missing piece that was somehow warping her all this time was just that.

Regardless, Aura thought she didn't mind continuing to be that way herself.

However, for Hikone, this innocently smiling being she herself had created, to be subject to the same fate—no, an even worse fate in which they were to eternally preserve the bedrock of the world—was now something Aura just could not allow.

And this was why she had come to a secret resolve in her mind.

She would rescue Hikone's future from Tokinada's hands.

Hikone might curse at her, telling her that following Tokinada's directions had made them happy. There was a chance that Hikone would shout at her, "Why did you stick your nose where it doesn't belong?" and Hikone's konpaku might rot away from their hatred.

Yet in the same way that her father had shut her away out of his own egoistic desires...

...her own sense of ego compelled her to teach Hikone about the vast world.

Even Aura did not know which would mean happiness and which would mean sorrow for Hikone. It was just that she wanted to give this to Hikone, the being she herself had created. By giving Hikone a vast number of options, she wanted to give them the right to make their own choice, of their own volition.

She wanted to provide the light that would illuminate what Hikone Ubuginu's soul desired.

She believed that even if Hikone chose to follow Tokinada and hated her, that was fine too. She couldn't be certain that what awaited at the end of Hikone's selected path would be happiness.

Even if becoming Tokinada's puppet for eternity might have been far more peaceful than another possible path, one that might result in Hikone caving in partway through, starving and in pain...

She just wanted to show it to Hikone.

She wanted to show them the infinite variety of paths that extended into the future.

That was why she had resolved herself to stop Tokinada.

She would do it even if that meant that her own life would end before she herself had chosen a path of her own will.

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"That was unexpected. I had no idea you would attempt something so foolish," Tokinada groaned.

Aura answered matter-of-factly, "Oh, I actually find this even more surprising. You acted as though you didn't trust anyone, with no exceptions, Lord Tokinada."

She hadn't been treated particularly terribly by Tokinada. Because of that, she didn't hold a grudge that caused her to desire his death; Aura was satisfied simply stopping Tokinada. However, the reality was that it would be difficult to stop him without killing him, so Aura had prepared herself to destroy Tokinada for the sake of saving Hikone. Because of that, she had also prepared herself to be cut down and killed by Tokinada as well.

Aura was hoping that in the worst case, things would end in a draw, but...

“What are you talking about? I knew that you would betray me from the start.”

“Huh?”

At the moment Tokinada spoke, her konpaku felt something abnormal happening in her physical body.

“What I found unexpected...was the timing. I thought you would betray me a bit before this or a bit after.”

“Huh?”

Then, Tokinada, who should have been immobilized, narrowly dodged Ginjo’s blow.

“Huh?”

When she saw that her restraints were not working on him, Aura realized the identity of the abnormality she felt in her body. At the same time, she went down on her knee on the spot.

“What’s wrong?”

Ginjo was questioning her, but Aura had trouble even breathing, and she couldn’t make a sound.

“Ah...uh...”

“Does it feel strange? Do you wonder why you cannot turn to fog and escape? Or why your spiritual pressure is rapidly disappearing?”

Tokinada, who easily cut away the patterned tentacle, looked down upon Aura with a contemptuous smile.

“I see. With your power, you really should be able to touch all of the Enra Kyoten that I have in this place—even the blades that have turned to ash and the ones that have turned into living creatures.”

In order to protect himself, he caused more of the strange monsters of Gagaku Kairo to emerge. “I told you, didn’t I? The Seireitei is a den of thieves.” Tokinada then glanced at one specific Soul Reaper as he said, “Do not forget that a common soldier could

be carrying a zanpaku-to that has the exact wrong affinity for them...didn't I say that?"

When Yumichika heard those words, he narrowed his eyes and glared at Tokinada with murderous hostility.

There's no way I'd mistake it for anything else.

The presence he felt from Tokinada's side...

Though normally the spiritual pressures of zanpaku-to could not be distinguished, it was a different matter once one became paired with a blade to the point they could call them by their name. He truly did sense a Reiraku color that was exactly the same as the zanpaku-to in his own hand from Tokinada.

It's likely empty on the inside, but the feeling coming from it is the same.

He had no idea what kind of powers Aura had or what she had been doing. But the one thing he was sure about was...

That Tokinada guy is attacking that woman using Rurirokujaku's power.

Rurirokujaku.

The zanpaku-to could absorb all the opponent's spiritual power and debilitate them.

That power had been invoked against Aura. Even if she turned her own body into mist, the spiritual power that controlled that mist was connected.

"When it comes to shunko users and the many kido practitioners, or those who carry zanpaku-to with special abilities, this kido-type of power works right away."

It wasn't the case that Tokinada, the carrier of Enra Kyoten, which could produce most zanpaku-to with a few special exceptions, knew of all the zanpaku-to in the Soul Society. However, he knew enough of the most prominent ones to be able to use them as befitted the situation. For example, the zanpaku-to called Urozakuro, which had been wielded by a prisoner of Muken, could fuse with other materials and had a power similar to Aura's. Tokinada, who knew of

that zanpaku-to's power, had dedicated several kido-type zanpaku-to to memory as countermeasures against it.

However, he hadn't done that to battle against that zanpaku-to's master. He had developed that plan in order to serve as a countermeasure when Aura betrayed him, which he had expected from the start...

"Good grief, if you were going to betray me, you might as well have joined Kyoraku's ranks from the start. I thought, after seeing Kyoraku and his riffraff easily taken by Kyoka Suigetsu, you would have waited to betray me until the end, when everything was over and Hikone's power was closer to being perfected."

Aura was on her knees and sweat poured from her forehead. Tokinada spoke to her, seeming both entertained and curious.

When Aura slowly brought up her head, she asked, still expressionless, "How...did you know I would betray you?"

"Hm. That's obvious, isn't it? Ever since you created Hikone with your own hands, it has been like you were the thing's mother. Didn't you experience emotions that you haven't felt before now?"

"..."

"In that case, things are going *just as planned*. I cultivated those emotions in your insipid mind thinking that it would be entertaining to squash them underfoot, but...you don't look too broken up about it."

He had fostered those emotions so she *would* betray him. Tokinada's endlessly irrational behavior made Ginjo, who had been listening from the side, scowl.

"Well, if you haven't developed any emotions even after raising Hikone, I can't do much about it. But it is so exhilarating to groom someone and for them to turn out the way you intended. I can't say I don't understand Aizen's and Yhwach's feelings as they continued to watch Ichigo Kurosaki—"

Before he could finish, a clash of metal interrupted his words. Tokinada intercepted the flash of Ginjo's blade just as the man stepped in.

"Ha ha! You didn't even hesitate, despite your own companion having collapsed! Well, then again, you only met her today. It's not as though you would develop feeling—"

As he spoke, Tokinada attempted to invoke Kyoka Suigetsu, but... Of course, the shikai would not activate.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong? You're full of openings."

When faced with the increasing weight and speed of Ginjo's attacks, Tokinada leapt far back.

"Impossible...you're still holding it back then, Aura?"

Though he had absorbed more than half of her spiritual pressure, she was still using a part of herself that she had dispersed in all directions to continue touching all of Tokinada's blades. One of those blades was Rurirokujaku, but without minding that her spiritual pressure was continually being absorbed, Aura still did not let go.

"Why are you continuing to touch them? At this rate you'll just die meaninglessly."

Aura stood then, even though her breath was faint.

"There is...meaning to this."

"What?"

"There's probably...something wrong with me."

Aura continued to pour her life into sealing Kyoka Suige-tsú's invocation as her remaining spiritual pressure was absorbed by Tokinada, who continued to clash with Ginjo.

"Because I'm not doing this for you, the person who looked after me until this point, Lord Tokinada, or for the seven hundred thousand devotees who believed in me despite who I am." While feeling the spiritual pressure of Hikone, who was still clashing with Kenpachi high in the sky, Aura smiled for the first time from the

bottom of her heart as she declared, “I’m doing this for a child who doesn’t even care about me—I’m wagering everything for their sake.”

It was a smile filled with the love of a parent.

In the past, when she had been confined by her father, was such a smile ever directed at her?

Ah, I can’t remember any smiles. I wonder if my father did love me. I wonder if my mother, whom I never met, did too.

Though her consciousness began to wane intermittently, still Aura continued to extend her spiritual pressure into the space around her. Exerting enough force that she was practically unraveling, destroying her very own cells and converting them to spiritual pressure, Aura continued to let emotions she had never had before pour out of her.

When Tokinada saw Aura in that state...

“How amusing.”

A sadistic smile adorned his face, and he spoke with a voice that was filled with more joy than ever before. He continued to keep Ginjo and the others in check using Gagaku Kairo and the flames of Ryujin Jakka as he said to Aura, “In that case, what do you think of this? What will your face look like as...the very one you are risking your life to protect cuts you down without any emotion at all?”

Tokinada continued speaking to Aura, who was weakened to the point that she could no longer reply. “Oh, oh! How about I give the order immediately? I’ll tell Hikone...to kill you!”

Then, as though to increase the turmoil, he tried to call out to Hikone above his head, but...

“Not a chance in hell.”

At Ginjo’s voice, the Fullbringers went on the move.

Giriko brushed aside the strange creatures of Gagaku Kairo with his swollen muscles while Tsukishima inserted his bookmark into the flames and rewrote their history so that they had “extinguished ten seconds ago,” as Ginjo ran along the path that had been cleared

of obstacles. He had transformed his appearance just a moment earlier and had white hair as well as clothes that sported a skull motif. He hit Tokinada with spiritual pressure that exceeded the Soul Reaper's.

“So this is how far you've come in mastering the power of a Hollow! I see, you are indeed suitable as a candidate for the Soul King! Then how about you kill me as well as Hikone now and take the throne yourself?”

Tokinada said that as though to test him, but Ginjo snapped back, “Eh? Me as the Soul King? Sure seems like a real bargain for a throne.”

“Of course it's not. Do you know how Fullbringers are born?”

“I think I can make a guess... It's through the Fragments of the Reio, isn't it?”

Why was it that Fullbringers were targeted by Hollows from the time they were in the womb?

Ginjo guessed the reason had to do with something that intertwined itself into their konpaku before they were born.

He had no idea what kind of influence the different parts of the Reio could have, but if a Soul Reaper becoming possessed by a part like Mimihagi had ended up like that, then when a fragment fused with a human, he guessed it would have an influence similar to the Hogyoku.

The Hogyoku—a device that would alter the very world as it fulfilled the desires of those around it. If one were to use the Fragments of the Reio in its place, it wouldn't be strange for them to be invoked using Fullbrings that turned attachments into abilities.

So it was possible that defensive instincts would bloom in young souls that had been intermixed with peculiar spiritual pressure, if they were being attacked by highly perceptive Hollows. Or in the opposite case, that people like Orihime Inoue and Chad, who had passed down the Reio's factor generation after generation, would have their defenses bloom alongside Hollow attacks.

Though Ginjo didn't know whether his guess was correct, a bold smile broke out over Tokinada's face at Ginjo's words.

"If you know that much, then what do you think? If someone such as you, who has the power of Soul Reapers, Fullbringers, and Hollows, were to become the Soul King, you could destroy or reshape the world exactly as you wish."

"Got no interest in that. We're going to turn the world upside down the way we want to."

"In that case, why are you lending a hand to Aura? Is it for revenge? Then again, it was the main family, not me, that ordered your friends killed."

Tokinada snickered as he uttered that unverifiable accusation. Ginjo answered at the same time he locked his sword with the man. "I haven't got any interest in that either. Even if I find out who did it, I still became the enemy of the Soul Reapers—that wouldn't change."

At that point, Ginjo narrowed his eyes and drove in his blade as a sinister look crossed his face.

"I've just got one grudge against you." The smile disappeared from his face, and as he recalled the face of a single Soul Reaper, Ginjo spat out these words: "Ukitake didn't tell me the truth...because of you."

"Gaha...ha ha ha ha! You heard that from Aura? I had a surveillance spirit bug on her, so how did you share the information? Also, don't you think she may have lied to you?"

"I'm not going to tell you our tricks."

In actuality, Ginjo hadn't been informed by Aura. That was why the surveillance spirit bugs' sham brains that Tokinada controlled couldn't have detected Aura's betrayal.

However, Ginjo knew everything.

His fellow Fullbringers Yukio and Tsukishima had ensured that.

Through those two, Aura's will had defied the flow of time and been conveyed to Ginjo.

What Aura had done to Yukio was simple. Using her own ability to rearrange her body even at a molecular level, she had etched a certain pattern into the backside of the business card she had given Yukio. It consisted of multiple QR codes etched not in black, but in a light gray hue nearing white. They were so light that at first glance they only appeared as a background pattern or the grain of the paper itself.

However, with his special power Yukio had immediately been able to read the information etched on the business card, and in exchange for information about the Soul Reaper family that killed Ginjo's friends, he had agreed to ally with her in order to trick Tokinada.

Although that seemed not to be of any benefit to Yukio at first, there was more than enough gain to be had from a business standpoint to get information from Aura's underground believers, who were from various circles of society.

Though it was impossible to know whether Yukio would have acted out of a sense of duty toward Ginjo even without the reward, the result was that Yukio had allied with Aura.

The rest was simple for Yukio, knowing his companions' habits.

First, knowing that if they were to confront each other, Tsukishima would insert himself into Yukio's past, Yukio didn't need to do anything himself. Though he had bragged to Tokinada earlier about sticking a virus into his past, all Tsukishima had really done was find out the situation directly from Yukio in the past. Since the only past that had been changed was Yukio's, they didn't have to worry about the spirit bugs reporting on them no matter what they did.

Then Tsukishima, who had found out the information in the past, immediately inserted his bookmark into Giriko and Ginjo. He did that to transform their pasts so that Ginjo and the others would already have an understanding of the situation that Aura and Yukio were in.

"They say that time is money, but, Mr. Tsukishima, I believe you should offer more gratitude to the god of time for having been given that power."

When Giriko said that, Tsukishima shrugged.

"Sorry, but I'm just not that religious."

"The flavors of black tea as well as fruit wine deepen over a long period of time. Even if your prayers are only superficial to start, eventually time will bring them to ripeness."

At that, Yukio interjected, seemingly fed up. "Giriko, the stuff you're saying is way past old grandpa territory and verging on cultlike."

Even as they had that conversation, the three did not lend a hand in the fight between Ginjo and Tokinada and instead just watched.

That was because they already knew.

This was a fight to settle the past for Ginjo.

While Ginjo once again pushed his blade forward, he answered Tokinada's earlier doubts. "If you asked me whether I was suspicious, it'd be a lie to say that I wasn't. But I've got no trouble accepting you're the kind of person who would do that, based on that earlier conversation."

"Ha ha ha! I see, I see! In that case, your hostility is justified! However, don't you think you've misunderstood something? I didn't have Ukitake in the palm of my hand. It was out of his own unhesitating volition that he snuck a surveillance device into the deputy badge and determined to become your enemy. It is a needless lie to believe the decision was difficult for him."

He said that with a somewhat docile expression, and then the corner of Tokinada's mouth went up again and he started to speak with delight. "After Ukitake was kind enough to make that decision, I simply *did not tell him* about the Tsunayashiro family's cruelty or the truth about the Fullbringers. As a result of his decision, the Tsunayashiro family and I have recently ended up benefitting from that, so I am very grateful to him!"

Even though Tokinada was being held back by spiritual pressure, he was still able to fend off the hatred that was directed at him as though it were a pleasant breeze.

"Oh, and I witnessed Ukitake's face when he made the decision. He was the one most opposed to hiding surveillance devices in the deputy badge at the aristocrats' orders. In the end, when he made the decision himself, he believed in you. He said, 'Ginjo's suspicions are needless and Central 46 will realize that soon'!"

"So then your family used the surveillance device...and killed my friends to gather the Fragments of the Reio. Is that right?"

"Yes. I fiddled with the Visual Department's data to report to Ukitake that 'Ginjo went mad, killing the messenger Soul Reaper and also his own friends.' He didn't believe it, but as a result, you became an enemy of the Soul Reapers and even killed Ukitake's underlings, so I suppose it had the same result. How pitiful that Ukitake believed in someone like you!"

Though he continued to speak to provoke Ginjo, Tokinada's speed was increasing as he did. Even while buying time by talking, he was absorbing spiritual pressure from Aura through Rurirokujaku.

"I would rather have told him the truth and taken his brothers hostage to keep him silent, but if I made a wrong move, Kyoraku would have sensed it. And if I were to corner Ukitake, I was concerned that I would incite Mimihagi himself to intervene. Really now, what a hardship that was—dealing with the Reio's flesh."

Tokinada said that with genuine regret. Ginjo said, "I don't regret anything I've done, but..."

He unleashed a remarkably strong blow that contained all kinds of emotions.

"I should have made you the first Soul Reaper I killed."

It was a strike that rivaled Ichigo Kurosaki's most powerful Getsuga Tensho. However, through the red flash that Tokinada released, its direction was slightly averted. The strike stabbed into a

distant rocky mountain and cut through it, collapsing an expanse of terrain.

“Tsk...you still had a trick up your sleeve.”

The flash that Tokinada had just unleashed was something from Hisagomaru. He could use the wounds that he had absorbed using its normal power to convert into an attack and release it. The strike, which contained multiple near-fatal wounds, hadn't been enough to cancel out his opponent's attack, but had just barely managed to deflect it.

Well, then what do I do next? Hm...

Responding to Ginjo's powers, Tokinada was deciding which zanpaku-to ability he would pull out next when he realized that Aura's spiritual pressure had started to disappear.

“Oops. It won't be any fun if I kill you by weakening you.”

He took his distance from Ginjo temporarily and used Tsuchinamazu and Senbon Sakura to keep the man in check as he turned his attention to the sky.

Hikone! Leave him! Come kill Aura first!

Tokinada attempted to shout that...

“Hiko...”

But at that moment he was assaulted by the sensation of a gust of wind passing through part of his body.

“Huh?”

Before he could comprehend where it came from, Tokinada saw it.

His right arm, which was still holding his zanpaku-to, turned gently as it fluttered in the air.

“What...?”

Then, a moment before the pain was transmitted to his brain, Kazeshini's chain, which had been sent flying, wrapped around that arm and pulled it far, far away from his own body in barely a single breath.

“Impos...sible...?”

The pain of losing his right arm dominated his whole body. However, the alarm that rose up in him forced that pain back down. The one who was standing in front of him and pinning him with a direct and powerful glare was Shuhei Hisagi.

“You...I’m sure I had used Complete Hypnosis on you...”

Though the shikai had been sealed by Aura, the Complete Hypnosis that he used on Kyoraku and the others had not been undone. Hisagi, who was shown the shikai before it was sealed, should have been put under the power of a very deliberate and strong Complete Hypnosis.

The scene playing out before his eyes, the slight amount of spiritual pressure of inorganic substances, and even the rustle of the wind should have been completely misconceived by him, and he should have been so deep in the dark that he wouldn’t be able to move or even think.

However, Hisagi was clearly looking at him.

Since his hearing, smell, and spiritual pressure perceptions were all being misled, it should have been impossible for him to know Tokinada’s position accurately through Aura and Ginjo’s conversation. Unless he undid the hypnosis by force, using spiritual pressure at Aizen’s level, Hisagi shouldn’t have even been able to attack him.

In addition, there was something else entirely unforeseen that had been thrust before Tokinada. Something like a cloth that hung between him and Hisagi had been torn to pieces and sent flying. It was the spiritual pressure interception cloak he had been wearing and had just abandoned.

Did he wrap Kazeshini in that and throw it?

Was that why I didn’t sense his spiritual pressure? Just before he started letting it rotate...

He sliced through the cloak and my arm...

Tokinada immediately realized what had happened. However, he wasn’t able to understand what had led to it. He was sure he had

made those around him mistake the cloak itself for sand, just in case. He considered the possibility that Hisagi hadn't seen Kyoka Suigetsu's shikai, but he was sure Hisagi's eyes had been open. It had been clear from Hisagi's surprised expression and his confusion after that.

Confusion?

It was just a second after he held back the pain that was about to assault him that Tokinada arrived upon an idea and turned his eyes to a certain Soul Reaper.

It was Hirako, who had been continually defending against the attacks and had finally gone down on one knee from exhaustion. Regardless of that situation, Shinji Hirako gave Tokinada a smile that was filled with mean-spirited satisfaction.

"I was actually thinking of using that when Aizen tried to show Ichigo his shikai. I really was annoyed when he said he wouldn't use Kyoka Suigetsu on Ichigo."

"Maybe he was already cautious of that happening," Kyoraku said in response to Hirako. At some point, he had come to stand next to Hirako with Nanao and was picking up Enra Kyoten's hilt, which had dropped to the ground. "What a lifesaver that you realized my intention, Captain Hirako. Especially since I didn't tell that to Assistant Captain Hisagi himself."

"Well, had it been Aizen, he probably would have easily seen through that sort of trap."

Hirako's Sakanade in shikai form swung in Hirako's hand. However, Tokinada did not remember feeling as though his vision or senses had been reversed.

In that case, who had he used that power on?

Tokinada arrived at the answer to that, and as his eyes widened, Hirako rotated Sakanade instead of revealing his tricks, and he repeated the word that Tokinada had used for his companions just earlier. "What a help that you're such a simpleton."

Hirako hadn't used Sakanade's activated power on Tokinada, but on Hisagi, the moment that Kyoka Suigetsu was revealed to him. In other words, Shuhei Hisagi, who was seeing front and back in reverse, *hadn't seen Kyoka Suigetsu being invoked*. The reason Hisagi's eyes had been full of shock and confusion was because his vision in front, to the back, to either side, and even up and down had all been reversed.

After realizing this, Tokinada turned his eyes in order to steal back the zanpaku-to that Kyoraku had in hand, but...

At some point, that hilt had disappeared from Kyoraku's hand, and it was nowhere to be found.

"Sorry. Your zanpaku-to's already been hidden by Okyo."

When Kyoraku uttered those curious words, Tokinada tried to raise his voice, but...

"Turning the other way, huh? You've really underestimated me."

He heard that voice from behind him, and it was already too late by the time he remembered the circumstances.

Ginjo's Getsuga Tensho, which had been released to the side and below him, cut upward and once again tore across Tokinada's body.

The fresh bloom of blood scattered high, high into the sky of the Kyogoku.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“GAH...”

After suffering a severe laceration that reached his internal organs, Tokinada's clothes were soaked in blood.

He careened backward and was about to turn up to the heavens, but he just barely stopped himself and kept standing. He planted his feet on the ground even more resolutely than before.

Then he laughed. Breaking into a cold sweat, he used kaido he was inexperienced with in order to forcibly stop the bleeding, and he continued to laugh.

“Ha ha...ha ha ha ha ha! I can't believe you would...you would be able to defeat Kyoka Suigetsu with something like that!”

“You stubborn mule, you're still alive?” Ginjo seemed exasperated as he readied his longsword in order to seal the deal.

In the next moment, Tokinada ejected a strange cloth from his left sleeve.

“What is that?”

In caution, Ginjo kept a step back.

The fabric seemed to wriggle like a living creature as it instantly created a swirl around Tokinada like a tornado. It revolved forcefully as it wrapped around his body.

“That's...the thing that was in Abarai's report...”

It was cloth that had been infused with special kido in order to force one to change locations.

Aizen had created the special equipment in an era when teleportation was completely banned. Its existence was confirmed when it was used by Aizen and Ichimaru to escape the scene after having murdered the Central 46 and by Kaname Tosen, when he simultaneously abducted Abarai and Rukia.

“You plan on using this opportunity to run? I think coming in quietly would be best for your sake.”

“Don't be so foolish, Kyoraku. If I'm going to spend the rest of my life in tedium until the day I die, I would much rather just die!”

Even as blood dribbled from his mouth, he raised a voice that was so filled with determination that he didn't seem as though he were half dead.

"In that case, let us kill you quietly."

Ginjo swung his sword, but in the moment before, the cloth had closed up any openings. After the fabric was cut up by the longsword, Tokinada had already disappeared.

"Tsk...I let him get away! Where'd he disappear to?"

≡

CASTLE IN THE AIR, ENGINE ROOM

"Ha ha...ka ha ha! I see, I see. This is the first time I've ever been so cornered."

Dragging a trail of blood behind him, Tokinada walked through a room of strange gauges.

"Oh well, I suppose this is how far I will let my fun go this time."

As he started up several of the gauges, Tokinada let his mouth warp into a grin.

"But I will ask that all of you die here."

Tokinada had equipped the multistoried building with secret weapons. He started to activate the fortress equipment he had prepared as a defense against the humans, which included artillery bombardments that were equal in force to the nuclear weapons from the world of the living and reishi cannons that would diffuse toxins that rivaled Konjiki Ashisogi Jizo, but...

"Hm...?"

None of them would activate.

Though he thought Aura could be the culprit, nothing about the weapons had seemed off recently, and most of the equipment was fitted with alarm systems that would notify Tokinada if any of them had been altered by konpaku manipulation.

As his suspicions rose, a jovial voice that was out of place in the castle echoed within the stronghold from all extant communications devices.

"Oh, hello hello! Why, I suppose it's my first time meeting you, Mr. Tsunayashiro?"

"Is that you...Kisuke Urahara?!"

"You know, I would always crush any surveillance bugs I found flying around my shop, so I feel like we've had a long relationship, Mr. Visual Department."

≡

Though Hisagi also had deep wounds and was out of breath, when he heard the voice reverberating from the castle in the air, his eyes unintentionally widened.

"That voice... Is that Mr. Urahara?! I thought he'd been kidnapped."

Yukio interjected from behind. "No way. We invited him as usual. Once we told him everything, he came right with us."

"Wait a sec! You didn't have time to have a conversation like that!"

"Since there were surveillance bacteria inserted into Aura's body, it wasn't like we could just talk out in the open, you know?"

Once Urahara and Yukio had met face to face, they had been conversing in a way that was different from normal talking.

Yukio's use of the compression artifacts that would occasionally run through the screen he caused to float in the air and Urahara's tapping on the floor with the cane in his hand were nothing other than a way for them to communicate with each other.

Since there was a possibility that Tokinada would decipher something like Morse code, Yukio had used computer language codes and converted Japanese into binary, then displayed those as static noise pulses to Urahara.

Urahara, who had noticed the systematic static, responded to that and replied to Yukio. Then, in order to deceive the surveillance spirit bugs, he showed himself actually fighting Aura, and using the explosion of fire he intentionally allowed himself to be captured by Yukio's powers. After explaining that, Yukio shrugged and gritted his

teeth as though he were slightly irritated as he glared at the castle in the air where Urahara's voice came from.

"Well, I was obviously a little surprised when he noticed instantly and replied back in my company's proprietary code. Seriously, what's that guy's deal?"

≡

"So you're getting in my way too, Kisuke Urahara."

As Tokinada smiled sarcastically, Urahara's voice replied, "And from my perspective, why'd you think I wouldn't?"

"I made Hikone in order to fully release the being called the Soul King. Why is it so bad to sacrifice something that was created for that sole purpose?"

"It makes no difference. Whether it's the revered Reio or Mx. Hikone, it will never be decent to sacrifice a soul with a will in order to maintain the world. I don't think it's perfect or ideal even using Yhwach's remains."

As though he had flipped a switch, Urahara's voice reverberated only in the room Tokinada was in.

Tokinada snickered as he spread the smell of blood and continued, "You hypocrite. Didn't you have the same goal that I had? Didn't you create those dolls you cultivate in your shabby hideout for that purpose? When the time comes, won't you use the Hogyoku and cram all kinds of konpaku into them to use them in place of the Soul—"

Urahara's voice reverberated again, interrupting his provocation.

"If that's what it looked like to you through the surveillance spirit bugs, then let me tell you this..."

Though the voice still sounded cheerful, it was charged with a pressure that could chill the spine.

"You have holes for eyes and terrible communication skills."

"So then you plan on continuing to turn your back to your own desires until the very end?"

"I don't intend to feign I'm a virtuous person. More importantly, how about you finally surrender? Regardless of whether your final trump card Mx. Ubuginu wins or loses against Mr. Zaraki, I don't think they will be able to take on everyone else, and this castle in the sky is now just a floating piece of junk."

Though Urahara matter-of-factly informed Tokinada that he had overridden all the systems, Tokinada did not let his grin disappear as he turned his eyes up to stare at the ceiling.

"I see. So it's just junk floating in the air then."

In the next moment...

He thrust a different-colored Tenkaiketchu that he had produced from his clothes into the floor, and at the same time, he used a special kido to hit the floor of the gauge room.

"That's more than enough to have some fun, Kisuke Urahara."

≡

A dull groan rang out, and the area below the castle in the sky became engulfed in explosive flames.

"Hey, what's going on now?!" Candice's eyes widened.

Then the castle's external bullhorns came online once again.

"Uhh, test test. Everyone down below—can you hear me?"

When they heard Urahara's voice once again from the castle in the air, Yoriuchi asked, "That Kisuke...was he up to something?"

There wasn't any way he could have heard her voice, but Urahara's next words reverberated through the place with perfect timing. *"It wasn't me. Mr. Tsunayashiro has gotten a bit desperate."*

"That's not good. Huh? Is that thing coming down?"

Just as Kyoraku murmured that, they could see that the building in the sky, which was larger than a skyscraper, was slowly starting to fall.

"Well, looks like he's really gone big, but we should be able to escape using shunpo."

"Doesn't seem like it'll be as simple as that."

Ginjo, who had undone his bankai and returned to his normal state, narrowed his eyes as he observed the surrounding reishi. There was pronounced reishi filling the entire Kyogoku. It eddied fiercely with the castle in the air at its center, and the surrounding air slowly began to transform.

“You don’t mean...he activated the Tenkaiketchu?!”

Then Tokinada’s voice, rather than Urahara’s, echoed through the external bullhorns.

“You won this time. Unfortunately, it looks like I couldn’t kill you.”

“Tokinada!”

Realizing what their opponent was up to, Kyoraku scowled.

“What? I’m just letting some junk fall from the sky. It’s not as though the world is ending.”

It wasn’t clear if he was trying to keep them there, or if this was retaliation for squashing his plans, or if he wasn’t thinking at all and simply wanted to see what would happen...

Though they couldn’t suss out his motivation, what he was trying to do was obvious.

Tokinada Tsunayashiro had destroyed the system keeping the building afloat and was attempting to transport the structure to Karakura Town.

“Hey, wait. If such a ridiculously large thing falls from that height...”

“Karakura Town will likely be wiped off the map.” Liltotto spoke in a chilled tone, finishing the sentence that Yukio had started. “We don’t give a crap what happens to Karakura Town. But it’s a Jureichi, isn’t it? I doubt that the world will be unscathed if it’s smashed to bits.”

“Well then...what will we do about it?”

Kyoraku refined his own spiritual pressure as he looked into the sky.

I think Captain Zaraki’s Nozarashi could cut through it, but he’s still in the middle of his battle. Anyway, it’s not as though it would stop the

teleportation if it were destroyed. As for the Arrancars and Quincies, they don't have a reason to protect Karakura Town...

Kyoraku fumbled for a solution that involved only the Soul Reapers, but before he could come up with anything, the situation deteriorated yet again.

“Wait! The part that got blown away before is coming down!”

They had all realized it when Muguruma shouted. A part of the bottom of the castle in the air that had separated from the floating system was falling directly to the ground of the Kyogoku even before the teleportation went into effect.

Most of those in the area were terribly wounded. Those who had some degree of stamina despite that started to move in order to evade it, but...

One figure was a step ahead of them.

At first glance, it looked like someone simply hoisting their right arm to the sky. However, the spiritual pressure perceptions of those nearby clearly indicated an abnormality in the figure. Centering on that humanoid shadow, a whirl of reishi writhed and, just as it seemed to stretch into the air, entangled itself in the fragment of the castle as it fell down. The speed of its fall steadily slowed until it halted in midair as though time had stopped.

The Fullbringers and Shuhei Hisagi understood what had happened. He looked at that shadow—at the ashen Aura Michibane—and forgot the pain of his own wounds as he shouted, “Don’t be reckless! If you do that, you’ll die!”

At a conservative estimate, Aura almost had no spiritual pressure left in her at all. While in that state, she was releasing even more spiritual pressure and trying to subjugate that gigantic castle in the air.

Based on her complexion, it was surprising that she was still standing. Aura smiled thinly.

“Are you worrying about your enemy? You really are a strange man.”

"We're not enemies anymore! I don't know what happened, but I heard that your capturing Mr. Urahara was also a sham. And you're doing this for Hikone, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not doing this for Hikone's sake. I'm simply doing this because I want to."

She turned her eyes to the sky, but it wasn't clear whether what she saw overhead was the falling castle or the small figure that was continuing to fight against power incarnate even higher than that.

Before Hisagi could find out, Tokinada's voice reverberated from the structure.

"Oh, I thought you'd do that. Thank you, Aura. I'm so grateful that you can be the actress in such an enjoyable show even while I am on the verge of death."

His voice filled with twisted delight was enough for them to imagine his unpleasant smile.

"Hikone."

In a syrupy tone, Tokinada spoke his final order.

"This is a matter of utmost importance. Kill Aura."

Those who witnessed that moment felt as though time had stopped around them. Far up in the sky, Hikone, who should have been continuing to fight Kenpachi Zaraki, had come to stand behind Aura.

They had likely used all kinds of hoho to do it. It was not just their speed that was odd. Even coming from such a high point at a speed that was close to instantaneous, they hadn't so much as raised a cloud of dust where they came to stand.

The scene made it seem almost as though they had used spiritual pressure techniques in order to bend the forces of gravity and inertia. Witnessing those movements, which could have been described as beautiful, most of those present weren't able to respond immediately.

There was just one who was up to it.

Only one of them had realized that Hikone would promptly, without any hesitation whatsoever, come to kill Aura, even in the midst of a fight with Kenpachi...

Only Shuhei Hisagi stood guard at Aura's back, getting in Hikone's way in order to protect her.

"Mr. Shuhei Hisagi, would you please move slightly for me?"

Hikone looked different from their earlier form, when they had met Hisagi. Though they had a peculiar appearance, like a Soul Reaper had been mixed with an Arrancar, their essential nature as a young person who still had some youth left—had not changed. However, internally they had transformed to an extent that could not be reflected in their external appearance.

Soul Reaper and Quincy presences that were complexly mixed together, as though Hollow konpaku were forcefully binding them, had formed into a twisted spiritual pressure. Had one looked at their Reiraku, it no longer would have appeared as a long and narrow cloth, but had transformed into a strange globe of all colors collected together.

"Are you planning on killing Aura?"

"Yes, sir! Since that was Lord Tokinada's order!"

"But Aura was trying to protect you. That's why she turned on Tokinada."

"Really?"

When Hikone tilted their head, Aura said, "Please stop them. It's not the child's fault."

Sensing that Aura was smiling bravely behind him, Hisagi couldn't speak but gritted his teeth and resolved to confront Hikone.

With her hand still lifted to the sky, Aura said to Hisagi, "Please don't mind me. You already know that I cannot be slain by any physical attack, don't you?"

"Can you really manage this as you normally do? If you could, wouldn't you already have turned yourself into mist and erased your presence?"

Her silence was his answer.

Hisagi gripped Kazeshini and took a step toward Hikone. No one who witnessed this situation would have thought Hisagi had a chance. Aura understood that well.

“Why are you doing so much?”

“I’m not doing this for you. It’s just that I’ve got to take responsibility for the past in my own way is all.”

Aura still seemed as though she could not accept that. Hisagi was at a loss for how to respond for a moment, but then he recalled something Muguruma, who was at the corner of his vision, had said, and smiled derisively at himself.

“Apparently, I’m pretty susceptible to seduction.”

Spouting out these words to dodge a proper answer, Hisagi continued on his path.

“I’m helping you out after you risked your life for Hikone because you’re a fine woman. That’s a good enough reason, don’t you think?”

Beside him, the specter of fear he bore accompanied him as always.

“So I suppose you won’t move for me then.”

Recognizing Hisagi, who stepped toward them, as an obstacle to fulfilling Tokinada’s orders, Hikone closed their eyes. At the same moment they opened their eyes again, they slowly turned the blade of Ikomikidomoe at him.

“That’s too bad.”

Hikone dodged to the side.

It wasn’t just Hisagi who was prepared—Yoruichi and Muguruma immediately readied themselves to respond, and the Arrancars and Quincies watched Hikone’s actions from afar to probe for an opening or to determine what powers Hikone had. Grimmjow, who usually would have leapt at them right away, was more deeply wounded than the other Arrancar, after having actually done so with Tokinada. He was being restrained by Nelliel.

They were going to move.

All of them felt it in that instant, as the mass of death named Hikone began to shift...

An attack like lightning falling from the sky sent the ground around Hikone flying.

“Guh...!”

Enduring the shock wave, Hisagi swept aside the clods of earth that flew toward him. What appeared in Hisagi’s vision was Kenpachi Zaraki, who had the terrifying look of a god on his smiling face, and the sight of him stopping Hikone’s blade with his own zanpaku-to.

“We were in the middle of a fight, weren’t we?! What’re you lookin’ away for?!”

“I was planning to finish before you could follow me, but...oh well.”

Though Hikone said that, there was a faint joy on their face and an expanse of spiritual pressure started to circulate within their body.

“It’s odd, isn’t it? I feel like fighting with you has been more fun than other people.”

“That’s the most important thing!”

It was a fight between two demons.

Just the aftermath of the force from their sword-clashes was enough to make it so that a normal person couldn’t stand, and everyone there realized it at the same moment.

Just how long has that Soul Reaper Hikone been clashing with Kenpachi Zaraki?

Though they didn’t know how much time had passed, being able to stop Kenpachi’s sword even once was abnormal. Those surrounding them were once again reminded what a fiendish being Hikone was as the two of them continued their duel.

“Are you not going to use your shikai, sir?”

Hikone released countless instantaneous attacks as Kenpachi used one brutal swing to drive all of them away.

"Hah! When fighting somebody like you, it's more entertaining to drag the thing out with the most possible moves!"

Seeing the many attacks exchanged up to that point, Candice said in exasperation, "Can you believe this? I can't believe these guys are smiling in the middle of a fight to the death."

"Back when he fought Gremmy, that scary Soul Reaper guy was smiling the entire time, you know."

"Come to think of it, didn't Gremmy seem to be enjoying himself too?"

Liltotto responded, "Who knows? Not like I would notice."

Since she replied in a cool tone, Candice and the others said nothing more.

"Hurry up and finish your observation so you can stop them from moving, you peeping Tom."

At Liltotto's words, Najahkoop gritted his teeth.

"Just wait a little. Their pattern is way too complex. It's different from Aizen's simple and ridiculously strong pattern."

When Najahkoop said he wanted another ten minutes, Liltotto sighed, "I'll just pray you don't get killed in that time."

While the Quincies were having their conversation, Kenpachi and Hikone were also exchanging a few words.

"You're getting slow. You worried about when I'll use my shikai?"

Kenpachi's blow made Hikone fall back dramatically.

"Don't think about crud like that. What's important is fighting here in the moment, right?"

"You're right. Since I'll defeat you with my full power and then kill Ms. Aura and everyone else here like I should."

"Hah! Don't get greedy. If you start thinkin' about the future and get stingy and hold back, I'll slaughter you."

"Yes! I'll fight you with my whole mind and body!"

At the same time Hikone made that declaration, the spiritual pressure contained within them started to circulate in an even

higher gear than before, and the balance between Hollow and Soul Reaper started to crumble.

“Their spiritual pressure can increase even more...?”

Just as Kyoraku said that, Hikone’s body quivered eerily. They attempted to ready their zanpaku-to again, but...

They stopped for a moment.

Hikone realized that another figure had inserted himself between them and Kenpachi.

“Mr. Hisagi?”

Hikone turned bewildered eyes to Shuhei Hisagi, who stood in front of Kenpachi. They understood why Hisagi had stood in front of them in order to protect Aura. But they could not understand why Hisagi would intrude while they were fighting Kenpachi.

The smile disappeared from Kenpachi’s face as though he were also bewildered, and he spoke to Hisagi’s back, which was right in front of him. “Hey...what’re you trying to do?”

Kenpachi’s spiritual pressure, which was crossed with his irritation, scorched and prickled at the surrounding atmosphere. Those around him were bewildered, unable to understand what Hisagi intended. If he had been trying to swoop in to help, it just looked like he was getting in Kenpachi’s way. And it wasn’t as though Hisagi was unaware what it meant to help Kenpachi Zaraki in a fight without asking.

“Hisagi...?”

“Hisagi...what’re you trying to do?”

Madarame was bewildered, and Yumichika forgot to call Hisagi by his assistant captain title, speaking the Soul Reaper’s name plainly. The two of them, who knew better than anyone exactly what it meant to get in Captain Zaraki’s way when he was brawling, scowled without understanding Hisagi’s intent. If Hisagi didn’t have a good answer, he would not come out of this unscathed. It wasn’t implausible that he might be killed by Kenpachi first, before Hikone had a chance.

Of course, if he *were* just trying to help, he likely wouldn't be killed without argument, but regardless there was a chance he'd end up flying from a punch strong enough to break his neck, with the pithy declaration, "You're in the way." That was why in the past, when Kenpachi had confronted Komamura and Tosen with Madarame and Yumichika, rather than all three of them taking on the captains, they had chosen a path of assistance, and the seated officers took on Iba and Hisagi, who were next to the captains.

However, Hisagi spat out a response that was far more dreadful than "I'm helping" or anything else he could have offered.

"I'll...handle them. *Please don't intervene, Captain Zaraki.*"

The air around them chilled. Those nearby were tense, thinking that Hisagi might not have been in his right mind. And Kenpachi's spiritual pressure had become so sharp that he seemed to make the air around him freeze.

"What...is he thinking?!"

"Hisagi...you're dead, after saying that..."

Madarame's eyes went wide, and Yumichika seemed to pity Hisagi from his heart as he looked at the Soul Reaper.

Hisagi had just uttered the very words that absolutely no one could say to Kenpachi.

Hisagi had said those words right as Kenpachi was in the midst of enjoying his battle.

He had said, "*Give me your prey,*" which was the same as asking for death.

"So I can assume you're picking a fight with me then, huh?"

To Kenpachi, the fate of the Soul Society or the peace of the world of the living were secondary concerns. At that moment, he had an opponent before him whom he could fight against until he ran out of strength. That in itself was everything to him; you could even say it gave his life purpose. In other words, anyone out to steal his prey was a clear enemy who intended to take away his very reason for being.

Kenpachi's zanpaku-to settled on Hisagi's shoulder. He didn't even need to tear through Hisagi. If he were to simply entrust his power into pushing his sword, Kenpachi's exceptional spiritual pressure would have easily crushed the assistant captain.

His life was undoubtedly in far more danger than when he had confronted Tokinada. Sudden, unequivocal death was looming over Hisagi from behind.

However...

Without any regard for the circumstances, Hisagi simply and matter-of-factly said, "That kid...Hikone is *weak*."

"What?"

Weak.

Hisagi had certainly referred to Hikone, the child before his eyes, as such.

He had unfortunately said that.

"You...you're calling that punk *weak* after the kid put up a real fight against me?"

"I am."

"So is that your roundabout way of tellin' me *I'm weak*?"

Hisagi then shook his head quietly as he turned to look at Kenpachi over his shoulder. There was certainly fear in his eyes. He was but a single Soul Reaper who, targeted by Kenpachi's spiritual pressure, desperately held in check his trembling body.

"Hikone. Is. Weak. Weaker than you, Captain Zaraki...no, actually probably weaker than anyone here."

This person who was *only* a Soul Reaper carried fear with him, but still looked at Kenpachi Zaraki as he continued to speak from the depths of his soul.

"For somebody like you, who's inherited the renowned title of Kenpachi... Captain Zaraki, beating on a weak opponent isn't a good look for you... So I'll do it."

Zaraki, who had been listening to him, thought for a few moments, then muttered to himself almost as though he were talking to someone.

“Ah, yeah, you’re right, Yachiru. Yeah, that’s true, Yachiru.”

“Hm?”

Zaraki’s usual demeanor returned and he said to Hisagi, who hadn’t been able to pick up the earlier words because they had been whispered, “You spoke the word ‘Kenpachi.’”

“...I’m sorry.”

“If we’re talking about the name ‘Kenpachi’ and not Zaraki, you’re right that I shouldn’t be picking on the weak.”

When they saw Zaraki say such a thing and then withdraw, his subordinates reacted by crying out in shock.

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

It wasn’t just Madarame and Yumichika who were surprised. Those who knew Zaraki could not believe that he would back down after finding an ideal opponent. Zaraki shouldered his sword as he turned his back to Hisagi, then immediately stepped between Aura and Hisagi. A memory of the warrior who had previously created the name “Kenpachi” floated in the back of his mind.

“Even just for argument’s sake, you brought up the name of Kenpachi.”

Then he was quiet—surprisingly so. While turning on Hisagi a spiritual pressure so chilly that it seemed as though it would melt and crumble the moment it was touched, he yelled out at Hisagi, “You put up an unworthy fight...and I’ll kill you even before that punk does.”

On the receiving end of that spiritual pressure that made the spines of those surrounding them quiver, Hisagi only had a curt reply: “Yes...thank you very much, Captain Zaraki.”

Then Hisagi confronted Hikone.

Though several of them considered whether they should lend him a hand, based on the exchange that had just occurred, it seemed Hisagi wanted to make this a one-on-one fight. There weren't many who could take on that *thing* that was in the form of a Soul Reaper.

Ichigo Kurosaki and Kenpachi Zaraki could have, as well as Sosuke Aizen, if he actually wanted to win. Kisuke Urahara and Mayuri Kurotsuchi might have been able to match up to Hikone as well, if it wasn't a match of physical strength, but this was no opponent that an assistant captain-level Soul Reaper could face.

Ginjo might also have been able to put up a decent fight, but he was currently supporting Aura along with Yukio and the others to stop the fall of the castle in the air. No matter how you looked at it, Hisagi was currently out of his depth. However, it seemed that he had met this being named Hikone in the past, and thinking he might have some sort of secret plan, those around him decided to watch what he would do.

Muguruma, who had witnessed it all, ignored his own wounds and stood up, gripping his hand into a fist as he murmured, "Don't be reckless, Shuhei."

Since you still can't use bankai.

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Shuhei Hisagi had never acquired bankai.

At the end of his training with Muguruma and Mashiro, Hisagi still hadn't achieved bankai.

"It's too bad...but your power has definitely made leaps and bounds in the last few days. Make sure you show those Quincies the fruits of that."

"Yes, sir."

In the midst of that exchange, Muguruma had noticed that Hisagi's fists were shaking in frustration, but there was nothing they could do about his being unable to reach bankai. However, another thought came into Muguruma's mind.

Mashiro and I were definitely half trying to kill Hisagi. I thought that bankai would be impossible without driving him to desperation, but... We weren't going easy on him. Was Hisagi...really that sturdy?

When he saw Hisagi continue to rise, even after he had collapsed several times, it was like watching some kind of immortal killer from a movie in the world of the living. Muguruma had determined that this tenaciousness was unique to Hisagi and had expected him to awaken himself to his bankai in the middle of the fight with the Quincy's.

But not even that had happened, and no matter how many times Hisagi was defeated, in the end, he had been shot by Lille, one of Yhwach's guards, and ended up straddling the line between life and death.

When he heard about that, Muguruma had formed a suspicion. No matter how many times he had suffered defeat, Shuhei Hisagi never died. Was that really due to his pulling through by sheer luck? Or, if it wasn't a coincidence, was that itself the key to Hisagi's bankai?

And now Hisagi faced Hikone.

Most of the wounds Hisagi had received from Tokinada hadn't healed.

When Hisagi stood in their way, in far from perfect condition, Hikone asked curiously, "I don't understand. Why would you not leave me to Mr. Zaraki?"

"I told you, didn't I? Captain Zaraki would kill you."

Hisagi readied Kazeshini and said to Hikone, who tilted their head quizzically, "I didn't come here to kill you. I came to stop you."

"I've already said it, but I think that's impossible for you, Mr. Hisagi."

Smiling wryly at Hikone's words, Hisagi answered, "Earlier I said I thought you were probably strong. I was wrong."

Hisagi gripped Kazeshini and looked straight at Hikone, feeling an emotion that was neither pity nor hostility. "The fact that you're not

even agitated that Tokinada isn't here now...means you are definitely weak."

"That's not true! Lord Tokinada told me that I'm strong!"

"No, you're weak. That's why you're not getting anywhere. Not how you are now, at least."

"In that case, I'll defeat you right now, Mr. Hisagi, and prove myself! I'll prove that I've become strong enough to be useful to Lord Tokinada!"

Hikone spoke with self-confidence.

But Hisagi refuted it.

"When I first met you, you were just a kid crying about how you weren't useful to Lord Tokinada and so you'd die..."

"Yes! That's why I became much, much stronger than I was back then! Now I won't lose to anyone!"

"It's the opposite."

Hisagi readied his zanpaku-to, and like an adult admonishing a child, he said in a voice that might have betrayed a hint of affection, "I think...that back then you might have been your strongest."

Hisagi then threw Kazeshini. The vigorously revolving blade approached Hikone, and tearing through the air around them, it traced a complex path. The black chains entangled Hikone and restrained them right away.

However, reality is cruel.

Hikone easily tore off the chains using simple brute force.

In an instant, Hikone's blade flashed as they closed the distance in the space of a breath.

After Hikone passed by him, Hisagi's torso was bisected horizontally.

Hisagi's body, sliced in half, crumpled...

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"Yo." The shade spoke to Hisagi.

At the top of a giant tree that made him feel almost as though he were above a forest or a mountain, a rust-colored windmill rotated creakily.

It was the usual scene.

It was a mirror of the world that reflected the cycle of life.

Death and life would repeat, creating something new to perish that would become a new wind continually circulating in the space between the tree and iron.

In that scene, Hisagi saw the form of Kazeshini that called out to him. Just as when Kazeshini had appeared to him earlier, he looked like a jet-black humanoid monster.

“Looks like you pulled something pretty reckless. Did you think you’d win?”

“No idea. I just knew that if I didn’t do it, Hikone would’ve died. It wouldn’t have made sense if I had somebody else fight and asked them to hold back in order to avoid killing Hikone.”

“Hah! So you’re trying to act like a hero? You didn’t think you’d be like Muguruma when he saved you as a brat, did you? Did you think you’d be able to emulate Kaname Tosen, when he saved you when you were scared of death?”

“It’s not like that. I just...found out about circumstances relating to Hikone, and even then I was only scratching the surface. I couldn’t abandon a kid who doesn’t even know what it’s like to cry.” Hisagi’s reply was neutral, even though Kazeshini had attempted to rile him up. “And...for some reason, I just felt like talking with you like this.”

“You went and got yourself cut in half *for some reason?*”

Kazeshini snickered and leaned onto the windmill in human form as he said, “You’ve started to get desperate, haven’t you? You looked up to the Soul Reapers, but you didn’t know what to do. So, recklessly and irresponsibly, you tried to become the ideal Soul Reaper. You kept struggling, trying to follow the manual the Soul Society prepared for you. And the result is this...”

At that point, Kazeshini's expression disappeared for a moment, then a smile different from the one before—as though he was satisfied by something—appeared on his face.

"Looks like you've finally gotten me to submit."

"What?" Hisagi inquired, not understanding.

Kazeshini began to speak about his characteristics. "I'm...not any White or Nozarashi, but I've got a little something that makes me unique. My nature is more shadowy than the other asauchis."

Though Hisagi wondered whose zanpaku-to White was, since he hadn't heard the name before, he kept silent and waited for Kazeshini to continue.

"You looked up to the Soul Reapers and ended up getting it into your head that you wanted to be as Soul Reaper-like as possible. So a part of me took on that form. The form of reaping a life."

"What..."

Hisagi's eyes opened wide with surprise. The shape he had so loathed had actually been created as a reflection of his own desires.

"I'm your shadow. When you yourself accepted both your surface and your underside, and the moment you followed your soul and put your life on the line, you accepted all of yourself—in other words, you made me yield. So I needed to ask whether you were finally determined to do that, and I made things work out so that we could have a talk."

With a more talkative than normal Kazeshini in front of him, Hisagi put on a pained smile and apologetically replied, "Yeah...I'm sorry I've misunderstood you until now."

Oddly, he felt as though he understood all of what Kazeshini was saying. If Kazeshini were his shadow then that answer would have already been in him from the start. He just hadn't realized it.

Comprehending that, Hisagi declared to his shadow, Kazeshini, "I'll offer it to you. My blood...and also my life."

A conspicuously strong wind swept by, scattering the leaves of the large tree and making the windmill rotate more harshly.

"If you're saying that you're my shadow too...then please lend me your strength."

Kazeshini, who had just been standing in front of him, disappeared before he could blink.

"Life is not just living. By asking you to offer life, I am not asking you to die, and I am not asking you to kill. Life includes dying. And as for blood...that's the oil that has kept your life burning. It could be money, your sense of duty, your pride...or even that thing you call 'fear.' I don't care. Take all of that and add it to my blade."

Hisagi seemed to hear that voice coming from inside of him. He realized that at the same time Kazeshini disappeared, the windmill had stopped and the world became devoid of noise.

"Controlling life, including both living and dying, is exactly what a Soul Reaper—a god of death—is, isn't it?"

Kazeshini's power flowed into Hisagi. He didn't receive a power that increased his spiritual pressure. The power seemed to come in the form of Hisagi comprehending the totality of Kazeshini as a concept. In that moment, Hisagi accepted his own shadow Kazeshini, whose way of being he had hated until that point.

Then the wind died, marking the end of the cycle of life.

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"You idiot! You talked a big game to the captain and then got done in right off the bat! Stand up!"

"Um...I think he's a goner..."

Madarame's response to the scene in front of him was to yell, but Yumichika had clearly seen Hisagi's torso cut in half, so he spoke almost as though he had abandoned hope.

Had Orihime Inoue or one of the more powerful members of the Fourth Company been there, Hisagi might have been narrowly saved from death. However, neither were near that place. Those who knew Hisagi sucked in their breaths when they saw Hisagi's body slashed into two separate pieces, while the others just watched with expressions that said, "So he really couldn't do it."

But two people had a different reaction.

"No...he's not done yet."

Kenpachi murmured that, and Kyoraku, as though he had also sensed something, said to the speechless Nanao, "It's okay."

Then, in order to make sure that all that occurred next was seared into his vision, he stared at Hikone's back.

"So, I'm looking forward to joining you again!"

Without showing even a fragment of remorse for slashing Hisagi in two, Hisagi whom Hikone himself had judged to be a kind person, the child once again turned to Kenpachi. But Kenpachi remained expressionless as he replied to Hikone, "Don't you think you're getting a little ahead of yourself?"

"Huh?"

Hikone then realized something strange. A black chain that they were sure they had sawn apart was now entangled around their arm. Hikone thought for a moment it might have been a remnant of the broken chains that had wound around them before, but they immediately came to realize that wasn't the case. Hikone was yanked from behind.

"...Huh?"

When they turned around...

Hisagi, the very person who had been *cut in half*, was standing there uninjured.

"What? Huh?"

Hikone marveled while Hisagi stood in front of them, wearing an expression that was no different from earlier. Hisagi looked at them without saying a word. Hikone had no idea what was happening and seemed slightly surprised as they gripped their sword.

"I'm sure that I cut through you, Mr. Hisagi... Was that some sort of kido illusion?"

"That was..."

As Hisagi began to answer, he was cleaved again, diagonally this time.

“I’m sure I felt my sword go through you that time!”

Watching Hisagi, who had simply collapsed, Hikone slashed through the chain wrapped around them and sent it flying. After confirming that it had fallen to the ground, the child turned to Kenpachi and Aura.

“Huh?”

They noticed that the chain was once again wrapped around them. And when they turned around, of course, Hisagi was standing there unharmed. Strangely, even the shihakusho Hisagi wore, which Hikone was sure they had slashed through along with Hisagi’s body, had regenerated as though nothing had happened.

Though Hikone thought perhaps they were seeing some illusion, when they looked at those around them, with the exception of Kenpachi and Kyoraku everyone seemed confused to see Hisagi there.

“Hey...you serious...”

NaNaNa Najahkoop, who had been observing Hikone, looked at Hisagi’s spiritual pressure pattern and was even more bewildered than those around him as he muttered to himself, “That Soul Reaper...isn’t he in rather a precarious situation?”

“Oh...huh? That’s strange...”

Hikone, not understanding the situation they were in, simply cut through Hisagi once again in order to be rid of the obstacle in their way, so they could fulfill Tokinada’s orders. They cut off both of Hisagi’s arms so that he could no longer hold his zanpaku-to. Hisagi attempted to put up some resistance, but unable to respond to Hikone’s speed, his arms were severed without his being able to do a thing.

Thinking this was it, Hikone looked to Hisagi in order to give the final blow, but...

When Hikone turned their eyes to him, both of his arms had already returned.

“In that case...!”

Hikone raised their hand and released a Cero at Hisagi. As he was unable to avoid the direct shot, it carved a gigantic hole in Hisagi's chest. When Hikone saw the result of his hit, which should have meant Hisagi had no heart or saketsu anymore, they thought Hisagi must have died this time.

But Hisagi still did not go down.

Though he slumped forward as though crying out, he slowly raised himself back up, and the hole that should have been carved into him had closed up. Even his shihakusho exhibited not a single tear.

"What...is going on?"

"Try thinking of the answer for yourself. Your Lord Toki-nada's not going to explain everything for you anymore."

Tokinada's spiritual pressure had already disappeared from the Kyogoku. They no longer heard his voice coming from the speakers either. Hisagi wasn't sure whether he had died of blood loss, fled the Kyogoku, or if Urahara had done something to him. The only thing that was certain was that the person who defined Hikone's world was no longer around.

In any case, there was no one to describe to Hikone a world that was convenient to Tokinada and pleasant for Hikone to hear about.

"Is this...some kind of trick?"

Hikone was unable to come up with an explanation for what was happening in front of their eyes and so, in order to confirm what kept occurring, decided to *deliberately* kill Hisagi. Hikone purposefully took a shallow step forward and stayed in a position where they could see their opponent, as they once again unleashed a slashing attack.

Though Hisagi attempted to defend against that using Kazeshini, the blade broke cleanly, and he was slashed from his neck down to the side of his torso, cut neatly in half. Hikone approached in an attempt to hastily pursue him and decapitate him.

That was when Hikone saw it.

The bisected halves of Hisagi's body were connected by a jet-black chain—one for each of his wounds.

In the next moment, Hikone thought they heard the chain jangling, and as though a winch were pulling them together, Hisagi's severed sections were reeled together. Instantly, Hisagi was returned to his original state.

“What...”

Unable to understand what they had seen, Hikone reflexively stopped moving.

They didn't even notice that at some point, the chains had once again wrapped around them.

“Hey, Gigi...when did that thing get turned into a zombie?”

In response to Candice's question, Giselle shrugged and shook her head.

“Not a clue. Besides, that abomination's not a zombie.”

“That ain't any high-speed regeneration...what is it?”

Grimmjow scowled as he looked at Hisagi while Halibel remarked to Nelliell, “He's not the only thing that's changed.”

“What does that mean?”

Halibel directed her attention around her. “The spiritual pressure in this place has been remade into a new form.”

Hikone was so bewildered they no longer had the wits to speak. They gathered that this was Hisagi's zanpaku-to's ability, but they couldn't understand how it functioned.

Hikone had learned about most of the zanpaku-to through Tokinada. All the information about the bankai that Tokinada knew had also been drilled into their head. The aristocrat had told Hikone to be most cautious of Konjiki Ashisogi Jizo, which was a bankai that could adapt based on the opponent, but they understood nothing about the nature of Hisagi's power, which was entirely unheard of. Not knowing how to go about accomplishing their goal, their confusion steadily intensified.

When Hisagi saw Hikone in that state, he said quietly, "I'm going to show it to you—what kind of world you're looking at."

"My world...?"

"Yeah."

What came to Hisagi's mind were the words that Aura had whispered in his ear in the throne room earlier.

"Please don't get the wrong idea. I simply have one request to make of you."

"A request?"

"Please pray, as a Soul Reaper. So that child's world is blessed."

Because she likely knew that Tokinada was surveilling her, she'd had to phrase her request so that he wouldn't recognize her betrayal. In fact, Hisagi had thought that she meant he should ally himself as a Soul Reaper with the world order in which Hikone was Soul King. If Tokinada had heard such words spoken directly, that was likely what he would have surmised as well.

However, Hisagi understood it now, after learning of Aura's true intentions.

She had entrusted him with Hikone's future.

"Seriously. Why me? You could've left this with Mr. Urahara."

He looked at Aura, who continued to extend her power to the sky as she burned away her life. Hisagi let out a troubled sigh. However, he did not disregard her words, and as someone with dominion over death—a Soul Reaper—he confronted Hikone's world directly.

"What I can do...is just show you that."

Then he threw both the right and left sides of Kazeshini.

"All I can do...is forge an understanding between two mutual cowards."

The two sickles he had released spiraled as they rose over Hisagi's head.

As that vortex shrunk, with Hisagi at its center, Kazeshini's two ends continued to fly, and eventually, they came into contact with each other and disappeared into the black maelstrom.

Then Hisagi quietly announced it.
He spoke the powerful words that were a Soul Reaper's culmination.

"Bankai."

The chains condensed in one place in the air, and in the next moment they turned into a jet-black mass that burst open, becoming a wind of spiritual pressure that raged through the expanse.

~~"Kazeshini Kojyo!"~~ "Fushi no Kojyo!"

The wind died down.

Hisagi, whose two blades had returned to his hand at some point, stood in front of Hikone as though nothing had happened. Two jet-black chains extended from his feet and twisted around each of his arms, firmly connecting him to the ground.

Faced with that curious scene, Hikone was even more dubious. Probing into the nature of that bankai, they extended their spiritual pressure perception all around. However, that only informed Hikone of a strange reality.

They didn't feel any spiritual pressure.

After the raging black wind had died down, the movement of the air itself completely stilled. Simultaneously, even the slightest tremble of spiritual pressure disappeared. The reishi in the Kyogoku, which was more pronounced than either the Soul Society's or Hueco Mundo's, had become entirely stationary as though time itself had stopped.

However, that was only the case on the ground and in the atmosphere.

Aura was still extending her spiritual pressure to the sky, and Kenpachi's ominous vortex could be felt just the same.

Hikone, who had no idea what was happening, decided to attack Hisagi directly instead of waiting to see what their opponent would do. They increased the quickness of their zanpaku-to's attack from earlier. Hikone, who confirmed that there was nothing strange about

their own spiritual pressure, was once again confident they had cut Hisagi in half, but...

Hisagi remained unharmed.

To be more accurate, Hikone certainly *had* cut Hisagi, but from the moment they cut him, the wounds closed up as though they had never happened. No matter how many times Hikone attempted to rend into Hisagi with their blade, the moment the back of the blade passed through the Soul Reaper, the wound was already healed. Or rather, it was as though Hikone had never cut Hisagi in the first place.

It seemed that the regeneration power earlier was like a preliminary step toward the bankai. Though Hikone had no idea what had happened within the Soul Reaper Shuhei Hisagi, he had awakened his bankai here, and as part of that process, had invoked regenerative powers through his chains.

Hikone was bewildered as the chains once again wrapped around them.

“Oh...”

Hikone attempted to tear them away as before, but they weren’t able to. When they pulled, the chains would extend and continue to wind around them. Where in the world were those chains coming from? In order to find out, Hikone turned their eyes to where the chains led.

Then their entire body froze.

It was high over Hisagi’s head.

At about the same height as where the castle in the air had been, Hikone saw it.

It was something of an entirely different nature from anything Hikone had ever known before.

Was it a jet-black moon? Or a sun?

The gigantic black sphere was fixed in place as though to cast a shadow on the ground. Rather than rays of light, it stretched countless black lines down to the ground from the sky.

Hikone's eyes registered the contents of that sun:

Chains.

Chains—the same ones that connected Kazeshini's right and left halves in its shikai form were quickly writhing and gathering to form a gigantic sphere. At about the same time Hikone realized that, Hisagi silently hoisted the blade he'd been gripping.

In the next moment, countless fireworks seemed to launch from the ground as the chains stretched from the sky like rain in a downpour. The sky and earth were anchored in place by thousands of chains. In addition, a bundle of chains thicker than the others dangled down behind Hisagi like a gigantic black tree stretching to the heavens, connecting the ground to the black orb.



Then, just as Hikone thought the chains connecting to them and holding them in place had come undone, those combined into one chain, the ends twining around Hisagi's and Hikone's necks.

It was as though their necks were being tied together as part of a twisted execution ceremony.

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After losing most of its ability to float, the castle in the air had started to gently fall. It had also started to transport itself into Karakura Town.

Within the castle, Urahara was preoccupied with a certain task he was making progress on. But then he saw the gigantic jet-black sphere and the countless chains that extended from it through a window.

He tried probing further into the spiritual pressure around him, muttering with a serious expression on his face but never becoming lax about his work.

“So that’s Mr. Hisagi’s bankai then. Well now, that’s...a pretty nasty one.”

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“Captain General...what in the world is this?” Nanao was looking up at the black sun that had appeared in the sky.

Kyoraku examined the chains that surrounded Hisagi and Hikone and began to form a hypothesis about the zanpaku-to called Kazeshini. “I did think it was strange...”

“Huh?”

“At first glance, Assistant Captain Hisagi’s Kazeshini looks like two swords, doesn’t it? But typically there aren’t zanpaku-to made of two blades in a set. My wakizashi-style sword Okyo is a zanpaku-to created by Ohana after the fact, and Ukitake said it was likely Mimihagi’s influence that created his two swords.”

“But Assistant Captain Hisagi’s zanpaku-to is...”

Remembering that Hisagi had had command of two sickle-shaped blades, Nanao was confused, but based on what she had just witnessed, an answer came to her.

“Then, Kazeshini’s true form is...”

“Yes, I think it’s likely.”

The shikai form of Hisagi’s Kazeshini...

It was a pinwheel or windmill-like blade that would pursue its prey infinitely.

Just how far could the chain that connected those two blades stretch?

“Kazeshini isn’t just a sword in the shape of sickles. It’s the chain that connects them that is the zanpaku-to’s true essence.”

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Though Hikone had been baffled by the strangeness of Hisagi’s bankai, regardless, the child did not waver and continued their attack. Hikone didn’t understand what was happening as the chain coiled around them, but it did not attempt to constrict them, and the chains themselves didn’t transform into blades or anything of that sort.

There was a chance that Hisagi was preparing for an attack, and in order to defend against that, Hikone used all their power to attack Hisagi before he could invoke something else.

Thinking they could kill Hisagi by blasting away his entire body, they hit him with a full-power Cero, but after the light that encompassed Hisagi’s figure faded, he was, of course, still standing there unscathed.

Hikone attempted to extend their Quincy Blut to their exterior and to commandeer Hisagi’s nerves, but the Blut went down a chain that extended from Hisagi’s finger and was fended away.

In that case, did they need to destroy the gigantic black sphere? They mowed through the thing and burned it through vertically using a sharp and narrow Cero, but...

Chains once again extended from the separated halves of the massive sphere and immediately returned it to wholeness, just as had happened with Hisagi's body earlier.

A bankai that makes the user immortal...?

No, I'm sure that Lord Tokinada told me that was impossible.

There was no past example of a zanpaku-to that could simply make its user immortal. Aizen had obtained his immortal body through the influence of the Hogyoku; that hadn't been a power granted by a zanpaku-to.

Considering the nature of zanpaku-to, it was unlikely. Even a bankai that boasted unparalleled power, as though in equal balance, always had a weakness.

For Zangetsu, it was the relentless spiritual pressure consumption.

For Senbon Sakura, it was the existence of the safe zone.

For Nozarashi, it was the inordinate burden on the user's body.

For Katen Kyokotsu, it was the danger of allies being caught up in its scope and the shared wounds from a double suicide.

And though it was a shikai, even Kyoka Suigetsu had a weakness that prevented it from activating Complete Hypnosis.

So the bankai of Kazeshini that seemed immortal had to have some kind of vulnerability.

In order to uncover that secret, Hikone attacked again and again, but...

No matter what they did, Hisagi would not fall. They weren't even able to tear apart the chains that connected their necks. Though Hikone tried to vacate the area, when they reached a certain distance from Hisagi, multiple new chains would entangle them and force them back under the black sun.

"What is this...? What is this power? With a power like that, why aren't you trying to kill me?"

At some point, the emblem of Hikone's innocence, their childlike smile, had disappeared from their face.

In response to Hikone's sorrowful questioning, Hisagi's reply was matter-of-fact. "Well, I can cut you."

In the next moment, Hisagi unleashed the blades in his hands. The two blades seemed to sink into the shadow on the earth and disappear. Then somehow a new chain entwined itself around Hikone's arm and ran along their skin with incredible force. Each of the links of the chain transformed into narrow blades and cut into Hikone's arm. Though they were nothing like Kenpachi's blows, they ceaselessly abraded the same area of Hikone's arm like a chainsaw, instantly burning through it.

"Ahh... Huh?"

Hikone then noticed something.

Their arm, which they were sure had been cut off, had at some point returned to its original place. They thought perhaps it was some kind of illusion, but the pain of the arm being severed did not seem like any hallucination.

That was when Hikone noticed something else.

It wasn't just Hisagi.

Like their opponent, Hikone had also been given an immortal body.

"You couldn't have..."

"It would've been nice if I had a bankai like Kurosaki's or Captain Hitsugaya's that could defeat my enemies real flashy-like. But apparently I'm just not cut out for that stuff."

Hisagi spoke self-deprecatingly as he explained. "You see...I'm a pretty huge coward. I'm terrified of dying, and ever since I killed Captain Tosen I can't help being terrified of having to kill someone. That might be why I ended up with this pain of a bankai."

A bankai was said to be the reflection of its wielder's soul. Pulling out the power that slumbered within an asauchi and tempering the zanpaku-to's soul with their mind, they would make that power bloom as a bankai.

In that case, what form had Hisagi's soul taken the shape of once he finally reached bankai?

It was the inverse of the fear he had—another form of dread. If Kazeshini could attain a form that would reap lives in shikai to keep the cycle of the souls in the world moving, then...

The bankai's power was a chain that sealed away the flow of life and brought the world into stagnation. By connecting everything, it forbade death, forbade life. The black sun even bound the reishi in the atmosphere.

Because of that, it was named Kazeshini—death wind.

The cycle of the world would stop, ending all retrogression and evolution, imprisoning it in chains.

In the circumstance where life was forced into stagnation, there was, ironically, a world with no boundary between life and death.

It may have resembled the form of the world before the Soul Society had been born.

“So then you and I just can't die? What's the point of that?”

“Naturally, this isn't forever. If you keep cutting me, I'll die at some point.”

Hikone tilted their head to the side quizzically.

“Why would you tell me something like that? In that case, I'll just keep attacking you until you die.”

Hikone did not understand why Hisagi would intentionally tell them how to prevail. The answer was extremely simple.

“Yeah, I'd die from that—and you would too.”

“Huh...?”

That was when Hikone realized it.

They had killed Hisagi multiple times recently, and with each attempt, their spiritual pressure had faintly decreased.

“But...why?”

Hikone probed with their spiritual pressure perception and, in order to confirm it, cut their own arm. Of course, it immediately regenerated, but they confirmed that a part of their spiritual

pressure went through the chain to supply what was needed for the regeneration.

Then Hikone unleashed a Cero on Hisagi.

Of course, he instantly recovered, but in that moment, Hikone felt a vast amount of spiritual pressure being absorbed from them. Their own spiritual pressure went through the chain and was stored in the black sun overhead.

It was as though the ball of chains was accumulating a vast amount of spiritual pressure to use for reverting the injured, or even objects, to their original states.

Their lives were shared, and the spiritual pressure of everyone who was connected to the black sun was being equalized. In other words, the more Hikone cut Hisagi, the more their spiritual pressures would both be consumed, which would end up healing Hisagi's wounds. And the result would be the same if Hisagi cut Hikone.

Hikone then finally realized this bankai's true nature.

This was a system that could be used when people who Hisagi trusted were around. If he were to cancel the bankai chains once they were at their weakest state, both of them would lose their immortal status. However, as long as people like Kenpachi and Kyoraku were there, or those who weren't connected to the chains, Hisagi's enemy could easily be killed by his companions.

In return, he would end up half-dead as well, though as a Soul Reaper, that was perhaps something he was more than willing to abide if it meant that the enemy's defeat was guaranteed.

It was a prerequisite that Hisagi would need friends around, and there were some other conditions that Hikone could guess at. First, though Hisagi's new wounds were healing, the wounds he had sustained before the bankai developed weren't. Therefore that black sun wasn't fully healing his wounds; it was simply an ability that returned things to the state they were in when it was activated. If that were not the case, he would have connected Aura and the other

critically wounded people with the chains in order to heal them using Hikone's spiritual pressure.

There was one other thing Hikone could assume—they had come up with a method of overcoming this situation.

"Mr. Hisagi, would you please release this ability?"

"You think I would?"

"Until you release it...I'll torture you."

"Well, I thought it'd come to this."

It wasn't as though pain would disappear.

It wasn't as though he wasn't in agony.

Given that, Hikone could probably drive Hisagi to exhausted pain and force the Soul Reaper to release them.

Once Hikone came upon that idea, they faced Hisagi with a serious expression.

I need to torture him... But how? How can I make Mr. Hisagi feel more pain than when he stood again after I cut him in half and bisected his body diagonally from his shoulder?

Had Tokinada rather than Hikone been in this position, he likely would have come up with many methods for torturing Hisagi, maybe even several dozen, and mirthfully executed all of them. However, Hikone didn't know how to do that. Hikone, whom Tokinada had always instructed to simply eliminate the enemy, could not come up with a way to torture their opponent on their own, no matter how they tried. Because of that, all Hikone could do was lash out and hit Hisagi with all their effort or simply continue killing him.

"I'm...very sorry."

As he spoke, Hikone continued to kill Hisagi.

Unexpectedly, Hisagi put up no resistance.

Had he put his mind to it, he could have at least interfered with Hikone's endeavors by cutting off their arms or legs as he had earlier. Or, had he manipulated the chains connected to his fingers, he could have easily immobilized Hikone.

Of course, Hikone had no plans to allow Hisagi to easily defeat them, but there were methods for Hisagi to significantly delay Hikone's attacks. However, Hisagi didn't attempt to do so.

“I'm...sorry.”

Hikone punched with brute strength, gouging through Hisagi's flesh, breaking his rib cage, and easily rupturing his internal organs. Though he immediately recovered, if this continued forever, it would become an agony that surpassed normal injury. Regardless of that, Hisagi stood up again.

Hikone could not understand it. Why was it that Hisagi would get back up no matter how many times he was killed?

“Please...forgive me.”

Hikone attempted to swing their sword again, but Hisagi smiled cynically and said, “If you're going to apologize for it, then don't do it. It's not like I'm a masochist.”

“But I need to do it for Lord Tokinada...”

“So you're blaming hurting me...on Tokinada?”

“...Oh!”

Hikone's arm halted.

Obvious distress coursed over Hikone's face.

“You understand that hurting somebody who isn't putting up any resistance is a bad thing, don't you?”

“I...”

When Hikone was ordered by Tokinada to hurt someone, they did so without the slightest hesitation. When they were told to kill, they would, and when they were told to let someone live, they would do that as well.

Tokinada would decide the right and wrong of it. If someone were to interfere with Tokinada's orders, Hikone wouldn't hesitate to attack and eliminate that person.

However, what was happening now was different.

They themselves needed to determine what was right or wrong.

They were hurting Hisagi because they had to in order to fulfill Tokinada's orders. Though Hikone tried to think about it that way, at the same time, they also began considering whether there was an easier option.

As though Hisagi had seen Hikone's thoughts, he said, "See, you've got a sense of right and wrong in you. Hurting somebody who's not putting up a fight isn't something you really want to do, right?"

"..."

"Or are you gonna put the blame on Lord Tokinada and say it's for his sake?"

"No..." Hikone paled as they replied.

Hikone, who believed that Tokinada could do no wrong and was right about all things in their world though others called him a villain, still couldn't bear to hear their lord being called evil due to their own actions—though they did not know whether what they were doing was right.

"Why...would you say something so terrible? What should I do then?"

"Don't rely on someone else for every little thing. You can't assume everyone in the world will be kind to you."

"But Lord Tokinada...Lord Tokinada would have..."

Hikone pulled from their clothes a tool that seemed to be used for communication, but Tokinada did not answer.

"But..."

Hikone wore an expression like a child about to cry. Hisagi's tone was stern, but his words were gentle as he said, "You're not a villain and you're not a puppet who has to do whatever Tokinada tells you. You're somebody who can walk the path of your own soul."

Hisagi moved one of his fingers to manipulate one of the chains, pulling a zanpaku-to that was the same shape as his shikai from the shadow on the ground.

"If you can't fight somebody who isn't putting up any resistance, then I'll battle you."

“Huh?”

“There’s a mountain of things I’ve got to teach you. I’m saying I’ll train you. Don’t worry about it.”

Hisagi blurted out that offer regardless of the fact that Hikone was by far the more powerful of the two.

Though Hikone was bewildered by what Hisagi was saying, Hisagi thrust out Kazeshini’s blade.

“Don’t hesitate. If I were an enemy, you would’ve died because of that opening just now.”

“...”

“When you fight an enemy, always keep half a step away from them. You never know what’ll happen.”

Hisagi gave Hikone the exact advice Tosen had once delivered to him without amendment.

Hikone couldn’t understand the meaning of Hisagi’s words and, in order to keep from becoming more confused than they already were, rejected Hisagi’s advice by sweeping away Kazeshini’s blade.

“Ugh...agh. Stop...please stop talking!”

They once again promptly killed Hisagi, but of course he regenerated.

Turning the tables, Hisagi’s blade stopped right at Hikone’s neck.
“Oh...”

“See, you would’ve been a goner right then. Aren’t you supposed to be way stronger than me? You’re full of openings.”

Hikone might have been a prodigy when it came to combat, but they didn’t have nearly enough experience. Taking into account Hisagi’s accumulated training, Hikone’s agitation, and this peculiar situation in which neither could die from being cut, Hikone’s skills could certainly be improved upon.

“No, this is...this is wrong. I became strong so that I could be useful to Lord Tokinada...”

“You need to have more fear. That’s what you’re missing.”

“Ah...ahhhhhhhhh!”

As though to reject Hisagi's words, Hikone emitted a scream that was close to a sob and cut Hisagi down multiple times in a tantrum. Hisagi endured the pain and thrust Kazeshini, always stopping just before reaching Hikone's throat, heart, eyes, and countless other vital spots. The scene resembled an adult Soul Reaper training an admiring child Soul Reaper.

Remembering his younger self, when he wasn't as powerful and cried after being attacked by a Hollow, Hisagi allowed himself to be cut down countless times and continued to stop his blade before hitting Hikone, giving the child pointers all the while.

This scene playing out as the castle in the air threatened to fall from the sky was almost comical, but Aura, who was keeping the structure from falling, endured the agony and seemed to find satisfaction in watching them.

Shuhei Hisagi was neither a prophet nor all-knowing and naturally had no way of foretelling his future.

He was not a hero that would go down in history like Ichigo Kurosaki,

nor was he a manifestation of brute strength like Kenpachi Zaraki,

nor was he wise like Kisuke Urahara,

nor was he skilled like Mayuri Kurotsuchi,

nor did he have the status of Byakuya Kuchiki,

nor did he have the talent of Toshiro Hitsugaya,

nor did he have the experience of Genryusai Yamamoto,

nor the brilliance of Shunsui Kyoraku,

nor the drive of Sajin Komamura,

nor the courage of Kensei Muguruma.

Because of that, specifically because of that...

The only thing supporting him was his pride as a Soul Reaper.

He only had his feet, which walked the path of justice that Kaname Tosen had shown him.

Specifically because of that...

...because he had continued to walk that path with honest integrity...he was capable of withstanding the repeated death, pain, and intermittent nihilism that assaulted him.

Though only a small amount of time had passed, in those moments Hisagi revived from over a hundred deaths.

Hikone breathed raggedly as they fell to their knee.

Hikone's spiritual pressure, which was once huge enough to rival Kenpachi's, seemed to have emptied to its lowest point. That meant that Hisagi's spiritual pressure was likewise almost empty. As Hisagi continued to stand in front of the collapsed Hikone through sheer willpower, he spoke to the child with simple self-admonition in his voice. "This world isn't kind. Just being alive is terrifying."

Recalling his past self, then the face of the man who had taught him how to live in this world, he continued in his own words.

"That's exactly why you've got to be kind to everybody around you. And I will try to do that as well."

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With Hikone almost unconscious before him, Hisagi glanced toward Kyoraku.

"I'm going to release my bankai...but don't kill Hikone when I do."

"Huh? Do you think I would be such a fiend?"

Kyoraku shrugged it off, but he replied with a serious look on his face. "Well, anyway. If I did that, the young lady over there would probably stop holding the castle."

Hisagi looked over and noticed the clouds surrounding the castle in the air already starting to seem abnormal. The clouds were steadily disappearing, and the edge of this disappearance was approaching the castle itself.

"The teleportation's already gone so far..."

Hisagi understood what Kyoraku was saying and tried to release Kazeshini's bankai.

Now that Hikone had used up almost all their spiritual pressure, they were harmless. He thought that he could just use a simple hakufuku to put them to sleep, but...

It happened the moment he released the bankai with both their spiritual pressures almost fully depleted. Just as he saw Hikone's zanpaku-to light up, a Hollow-like monstrosity—Ikomikidomoe—appeared and assaulted Hikone.

“What...?”

Since it had all happened in the span of a second, those surrounding them were too late to respond.

But there was one who could still protect Hikone.

The one who just barely defended Hikone the moment that Ikomikidomoe's fangs threatened to tear the child's head off was Aura, who instantly came between them. Since she had been directing all of her spiritual pressure toward the castle in the sky, she hadn't been able to fully turn herself into mist, and the side of her torso was gouged deeply as her body was flung into the air.

“Oh...”

“Aura!”

Though Hisagi was almost out of breath, he ran to where Aura had collapsed and held her.

Meanwhile, Ikomikidomoe, now separated from Hikone, was rapidly absorbing the spiritual pressure around him and growing at a terrific pace.

“I was so close to consuming all the Fragments of the Reio.”

“That numbskull...”

Grimmjow gritted his teeth as he saw Ikomikidomoe ominously transform his entire form.

“But, right now, a small piece is enough.”

When he had separated from Hikone, he must have stolen some of the Fragments of the Reio that were in the child. He was absorbing the reishi in the atmosphere with a force that was incomparable and

condensing an incredibly ominous spiritual pressure as he stood in the way of Hisagi and the others.

“So this is a Fragment of the Reio, then! Ha ha, ha ha ha! That was it! I remembered! I remembered it!”

Even a small Fragment of the Reio seemed to have given Ikomikidomoe immense power, to the point that the Manako Osho's zanpaku-to ability had been weakened and he had apparently regained his true name that had been overwritten. At the same time, his spiritual pressure swelled with an explosive force, and he diffused a Hollow presence within the Kyogoku that was far more pronounced than before.

Then, as a first step toward killing everyone in that place and getting his revenge on Squad Zero, he raised his voice to extol his own true name.

“Etch it into your flesh along with your despair. My true name is—”
“Hey.”

Ikomikidomoe turned toward the voice behind him, and...
...leaping high from the sky with Nozarashi, a gigantic zanpaku-to larger than he was tall, gripped in his hand, a demonic form filled Ikomikidomoe's sight.

“I'm not lettin' anybody take you from me.”
Then a blow like a fierce god's—a blow strong enough to smash a meteor—came down on Ikomikidomoe.

In the end, Ikomikidomoe was unable to say his own true name.
All that was left was Ikomikidomoe in his faded sword form after Nozarashi crushed and dispersed most of the power from the Fragments of the Reio.

“...the hell?”
Kenpachi seemed disappointed as he regarded the broken and battered zanpaku-to blade that may or may not have retained its will, and he spat out...

“Your name might as well've been ‘wimp.’”

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"Aura! Hang in there!" Hisagi shouted as he laid Aura on the ground.

Though Nanao tried to use kaido on her, Aura shook her head slightly and held her wound with her hand as she stood up.

"Don't...mind me. You should treat Hikone..."

She still held Hikone in her arms from when she had rescued the child. Hikone, who had lost most of their spiritual pressure, slowly opened their eyes, looking dazed.

"...Ms...Aura...?"

"I'm fine. Please, Master Hikone, take your time and rest."

Aura uttered these words as though she were the next Soul King's subordinate, yet when Nanao looked at Aura then, she felt she didn't see a servant, but a mother.

Aura left Hikone with Nanao and once again turned her attention to the sky.

"Hey, what are you planning?"

Aura, still pale, smiled at Hisagi as she always did and told him, "There's something I need to do."

The teleportation had already reached a section of the outer walls, at a point where they couldn't postpone it a moment more.

Urahara's voice once again echoed from the external speakers.

"Apologies for the delay!"

In the next moment, a gigantic garganta opened its maw at the lower end of the castle in the air. Once they saw the jet-black fissure, even bigger than a Menos Grande or the Hollow Fura, all of them realized what Aura and Urahara's aim was.

"I've already discussed what we would do in the event this occurred with President Vorarlberna. I've exhausted all my tricks, and this is as big as I can make it right now."

The Arrancars seemed to have complex feelings about a Soul Reaper like Urahara opening such an unbelievably large garganta. Nelliel sighed.

"A garganta isn't exactly supposed to be a garbage dump...but I suppose with the situation being what it is, we don't have any other options."

"That's more than large enough."

Then Aura subjugated the **konpaku tamashi** in the air and attempted to leap into the sky.

"Hey...are you just leaving?"

When Hisagi saw Aura's injuries, he realized her very survival was precarious. If she were to try to control the fall of the gigantic castle in the air, it would be suicide. At the same time, he understood that he couldn't stop her, no matter what he did.

He thought she would say something to Hikone, but Aura slowly shook her head.

"I was able to hold Hikone in my own arms for the first time. That was enough."

"I see... Well, if that's how you feel, then all right."

"Yes. Please do take care as well, Mr. Hisagi."

Though he felt that the smile on her face at that moment was different from her usual mechanical expression, Hisagi didn't question what it meant.

Hikone slowly reached out their hand from where they had collapsed.

"Wait...please wait."

Aura turned her eyes to Hikone and gave the child a smile filled with more heartfelt affection than the one she had shown Hisagi.

"Please, stay in good health."

Though her words were curt, it seemed that they were enough for Aura.

"Oh..."

Before Hikone could say anything else, she had turned herself into mist. She transformed, though they had thought she was no longer able to just a moment before. Doing so must've been a burden for

her, but she likely wanted to demonstrate for Hikone that she was fine.

Then the shape of the castle in the sky changed through Aura's handiwork and slowly disappeared into the fissure of the garganta.

At the same time, as though the teleportation had completed, the clouds floating in the Kyogoku fully cleared.

Hikone's hands were still reaching toward her, but eventually their yearning seemed to fade as they muttered with an unspeakably sorrowful expression, "I wasn't able to fulfill the role Lord Tokinada gave me."

"Yeah, you weren't." Hisagi answered him, though he thought Hikone had probably been speaking to themselves.

"I tried to kill...Ms. Aura for Lord Tokinada...I still think that was right, even now...to do it for Lord Tokinada."

"Do you?"

Hisagi noticed a faint doubt in Hikone's eyes. Hikone would soon find the answer. Understanding that, Hisagi didn't immediately condemn Tokinada's behavior.

After Hikone was silent for a while, they turned to Hisagi and asked directly, "Why would Ms. Aura have saved me?"

Though he could think of several reasons, Hisagi felt that at this point it wasn't right for him to give an answer, so he sidestepped the question. "Don't think about it too much. She did that because she wanted to. That's good enough, don't you think?"



“She did it...because she wanted to? Didn’t she have a reason?”

They likely felt the effect of Ikomikidomoe having stolen some of their Fragments of the Reio. Though Hikone should have had leftover spiritual pressure about the same as Hisagi’s, Hikone was so emaciated they couldn’t move. Still, they continued. “I heard that...Ms. Aura is something like...my mother.”

Hisagi’s words had given them more confidence about the reason for Aura’s actions.

“Was she? Then she really doesn’t need to explain.”

Hikone was silent for a while... Then, for the first time, they spoke from their own heart, rather than following Tokinada’s will.

“Do you think...I’ll actually be able to call Ms. Aura ‘mother’ someday...? No...do I even...have the right to...?”

Hikone’s voice trailed off as Hisagi shrugged.

“If you don’t know, then I’ll tell you.”

Despite being wounded all over, he tried not to show his own weakness as he said to Hikone with a bitter smile, “Having a reason or having the right to...these things don’t matter when it comes to a mom fawning over her kid.”

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THE SOUL SOCIETY,

TSUNAYASHIRO FAMILY MAIN RESIDENCE

“Ha...ha ha ha! I suppose when one lives for an extended period of time, things like this occasionally happen.”

Tokinada was in the deserted inner parlor of the Tsunayashiro family residence. He had used a small Tenkaiketchu with coordinates set to this room rather than Karakura Town in order to escape from the Kyogoku to the Soul Society.

Still, he had suffered severe wounds, and he left a trail of blood behind him as he slowly headed deeper into the residence.

“Well, that was a good experience. I suppose even a group of cornered rats can kill a tiger. I still have many cards to play, but until I heal these wounds, I should hide for a while...”

As he muttered to himself, Tokinada opened the door to the chamber of the head of family. At that point, he was bothered by the faintest sense of anxiety. The air in the room was slightly different than usual. Though he had been severely wounded, an unrelated chill ran through his body.

“...Huh?”

Someone was in the room. Whether it was a servant or a guest, or a confident assassin, it was not easy to sneak into this place. It was protected by several barriers so that anyone without Tsunayashiro blood would have a difficult time stepping foot in it.

However, it might have been possible for a Soul Reaper with the rank of captain to pass through those barriers.

“Are you the ninth successor of the Fon family...? Or Byakuya Kuchiki...?”

He remembered the face of the Secret Remote Squad head that he had met half a day earlier, as well as that of the other member of the Four Great Noble Clans he had been disdainful toward some time earlier. With his zanpaku-to stolen and his blood loss severe, the likelihood of his surviving a captain was low.

Regardless, Tokinada smiled boldly.

How entertaining. It seems that I cannot survive this much entertainment and won't be making a comeback.

In a test of himself, Tokinada neither ran nor hid, but simply stepped in.

“Who are you? Don’t you think it’s somewhat impolite for you to step foot into the Tsunayashiro residence?”

From the back of the room, a shadow near the seat of the head of family answered.

“Oh yes, how rude of me.”

“You...”

“I couldn’t find anyone around, so I thought it was abandoned—my mistake.”

“Mayuri...Kurotsuchi.”

Tokinada smiled cynically at the man. "You're the one who delivered Kyoraku and the others into the Kyogoku, aren't you? I thought you were thoroughly occupied with that."

"I've left that with a remote-controlled double. The person here with you now may also be a double, but it makes no difference."

"I doubt you came here under Kyoraku's instructions. Did you come to capture me? Or did you perhaps come to see if you could get one of the Four Great Noble Clans in your debt?"

"I don't see much use in making you indebted to me in your current situation. Then again, I wouldn't have much interest in you even if you were in perfect condition." Mayuri's tone was matter-of-fact. "But I was interested that the Tsunayashiro family that heads the Four Great Noble Clans went to some lengths to conduct an experiment to create a Soul King. Though the data from the surveillance bugs I attached to the Corpse Unit is coming back at the same time the barrier around the Kyogoku is breaking..."

Though not much time had passed since Tokinada's flight, Mayuri sighed dramatically and shook his head as though he comprehended everything that had happened.

"Considering all this along with the data you left behind here, it seems that you really are an amateur with only superficial knowledge, Tokinada Tsunayashiro. Had you entrusted the plan to me from the start, I would at least have been able to rapidly perfect the Soul King's vessel."

"Heh heh...but you didn't come here to say you'd help me make my dream into reality."

"The biggest obstacle in the way of increasing the perfection of the Soul King's vessel is the being Tokinada Tsunayashiro himself. Had you entrusted the matter with me, I would have immediately eliminated you, of course. Even if you were to boast about leaving it all to me for the sake of a greater cause, it would be troublesome if you were to meddle according to your whims and indulgences."

Mayuri spoke as though the matter were so obvious he could not possibly understand why Tokinada had even asked the question, and Tokinada let a strained smile form on his face as he endured the pain of his wounds.

“Heh heh...that was very harsh of you. However, there is no way I would have created Hikone for the sake of a greater cause.”

Tokinada narrowed his eyes and ridiculed the “greater cause” Mayuri had just mentioned.

“There was no reason behind creating a Soul King other than for my own indulgence. If you’ve seen the Corpse Unit’s data, you understand the depth of the Soul Society’s crime that I spoke of, do you not? This world was formed as a result of treachery and spite. There doesn’t need to be any great cause in a world where the descendants of criminals fight for their wretched profits! The world should *revolve and rot* around our amusements and desires, should it not?!”

“It seems we do not see eye to eye. To use the crimes of the past as a reason to block change in the world now is just laziness.”

“Heh...it’s always that way for Kisuke Urahara and the rest of you scientists. You talk extravagantly about making the world turn or creating something new...but no matter how you spin it, you are drowning in your own selfish thirst for knowledge, and you only amount to a servant to the world’s profit!”

The moment the name Kisuke Urahara had come out of Tokinada’s mouth and he had equated the two of them, Mayuri’s eyes narrowed and he shook his head with pity.

“Good grief, it would mean trouble for me if you were to speak so trivially of science. You’re almost like a child throwing a fit.”

“Yes! I won’t deny that! Tearing apart a bug crawling along the ground in front of my eyes and laughing at it is the same as using my influence in the world to achieve my gratification! There is no difference between you and me! We both dance atop the ants and

occasionally find one that is powerful—that is all! Aren't you the same, Mayuri Kurotsuchi?"

Regardless of the fact that he himself was half dead, Tokinada grinned and shouted, spewing blood.

"Now what will you do? Will you join me? Shall we kill each other? Or will you take me like the mob of others you dominate, bottling me up in order to make me suffer forever as an experimental subject? No matter which route you take, remember this...the man you see before your eyes is the very karma of the Soul Society!"

Without his position as a noble and without Enra Kyoten, would Tokinada have held sway over Mayuri Kurotsuchi? It was doubtful that the influence of nobility meant anything when it came to Mayuri Kurotsuchi.

Regardless of that, the man prioritized his own amusement.

Instead of answering Tokinada, Mayuri remarked indifferently, "I don't know what you're so angry about, but I only came here to observe your research. Well...regardless, I will apologize for entering this room without permission."

At that point, Mayuri turned his eyes away and continued as though the matter were becoming tedious to him. "And if I were to apologize for other things as well, it would be for not relocking the door."

"Huh?"

Tokinada scowled when he didn't understand Mayuri's words.

In the next moment, Tokinada felt an impact on his back.

"What...?"

He had no time to feel the pain. He realized that something cold was entering his body.

"What...just..."

Tokinada realized that a blade had emerged from his abdomen. After having observed tens of thousands of zanpaku-to, Tokinada immediately recognized it.

It wasn't even a shikai, just a simple asauchi.

Mayuri didn't move a step in front of his eyes. It was as though he no longer had the slightest interest in Tokinada as he looked at the bindings on the room's bookshelves.

"Impos...ible... Who..."

Tokinada's spine creaked as he turned around and found a girl dressed in black who appeared to be quite young.

"Hm? Who...are you...?"

For a moment he thought that she was Soi Fon, based on her stature, but he realized that wasn't the case. Then Tokinada noticed that the clothing she wore matched that of a family of assassins he himself had framed in the past, pinning the blame for the killing of one of the Tsunayashiro family on them.

"I see. So...the commission has finally been filled, then?"

As Tokinada neared his ironic end, he said something she wasn't expecting.

"C-commission...? What...what are you talking about?"

Her voice quivered, and she gripped her blade as though she did not know any of the fundamentals of swordsmanship. Seeing that, he realized that she was just a trainee who was far from having the skills of a true assassin.

"Everyone's...spite...! Tokinada Tsunayashiro...! You...did that to my whole family...!"

The young girl grew teary-eyed while trying to speak. Tokinada was in a daze for a moment before he spat up a gob of blood and squeezed out some empty words. "Your parents'...enemy...?"

"Th-that's right! You did that to everyone..."

To Tokinada, the emotions in the girl's eyes were nothing like an assassin's. This girl whose name he didn't know was different from the assassins Tokinada had seen. Since she still had feelings for her family, a hindrance an assassin would have immediately abandoned, it was likely she was completely inexperienced.

"You say that you killed me...for something as small as that?"

"As small as...something as *small* as that...?!"

The girl in black opened her eyes wide and raged as she stabbed Tokinada again and again.

Mayuri acted as though he had no interest in the tragedy unfolding before him and skimmed a book that had happened to draw his eye. The sound of the blade hitting flesh and of pages turning filled the room.

How much time had passed?

After stabbing Tokinada countless times with the asauchi in her hand, the assassin sank to the floor, breathing raggedly. However, Tokinada was still standing.

“So...are you...done, then?”

“Uh ugh...”

Seeing his nightmarish behavior, the would-be assassin’s fear had overtaken her hatred, and she started to quiver from a different emotion. With such an enemy in front of him, Tokinada slowly straightened his form from its slumped position. The sound of something shredding within Tokinada reverberated, and blood started to flow from his mouth without ceasing.

Death.

It would have been clear to anyone that Tokinada had arrived at that fate.

If he could just squeeze out his remaining strength to fire one kido at her, he would have easily been able to send the inexperienced assassin before him into oblivion. However, Tokinada’s eyes had already turned away from the assassin. Tokinada forced out his remaining strength to take his final action.

It wasn’t to cry out in fear of death.

It was not even to shake in rage from the fate of being killed by someone he looked down upon.

It wasn’t to repent for his wife or Tosen now that he was on the verge of death.

Nor did he slaughter the assassin who had fatally wounded him.

Nor did he leave a message with Mayuri.

“Ha...ha ha ha...”

He simply laughed.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I get it! So I...I die here! It was not Tosen, who held a grudge for so long, but someone like this...an insignificant nobody seeking revenge has caused me to meet my doom! So this is how I will spend my last moments, after taking everything from the Tsunayashiro family and properly inheriting the karma of the Soul Society! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Uh...ahh...”

Overwhelmed by Tokinada’s laughing even as he spat blood, the assassin was immobilized.

Meanwhile, Mayuri silently lifted his eyes from his book. His expression didn’t change as he listened to Tokinada’s final words. Tokinada then turned his attention not to the two who were present in the room, but to the man he shared a fate with who was not there.

“See...see what happened, Shunsui Kyoraku?!”

Pouring his disappearing life into it, Tokinada spewed vast amounts of blood as he, the head of the Four Great Noble Clans, simply shouted words of malice and ridicule.

“My life comes to an end here, Kyoraku! That means a girl whose name I don’t even know defeated all of you! You couldn’t even reach me! Finally! Finally I ruined your plans! How unfortunate! How deplorable! You Soul Reapers! Now you’ll never be able to punish me!”

Only the volume of his voice was clear. His face was so pale that it was a wonder he was still alive. Though he shouldn’t have been able to speak due to his wounds, Tokinada turned his bloodshot eyes to the void as he continued to yell at those who weren’t there, amusement on his face.

“How’s that, Tosen?! Do you feel crushed? I will...die without feeling the slightest regret for what I did! How’s that, Shuhei Hisagi?! How’s that, Ginjo?! How’s that, Aura?! Are you being killed by

Hikone right now? Even if you survive, you won't...be able...to lay a hand on my soul anymore."

The assassin girl was so alarmed by the unintelligible shouts of her opponent that all she could do was watch. It seemed that Tokinada could no longer see. He was slowly walking toward nothing and no one even as a wicked smile continued to warp his features.

"How's that...Ukitake...the man you tried to believe in...is still going to die...and nothing will change..."

As though a wound-up spring had shot up within him, he spat out yet more blood and collapsed on the spot.

It was unclear what he saw in his last moments...

"How's...that...Kakyo? The stars...you..."

Though his eyes looked peaceful for just one moment, his mouth twisted heinously, as though he were trying to cast away that emotion and his own salvation...



Then he simply came to a halt.

"So it was the sentimentality of an inexperienced assassin that did it, then."

After Mayuri gave the still quivering young assassin a glance, he slowly walked out and left the Tsunayashiro family room behind.

"I see. So it seems that cutting short the Soul Society's karma only required something as small as that."

Mayuri likely would have been able to extend Tokinada's life. It might have been possible for him to resurrect the man like the Corpse Unit or as a living corpse like Izuru Kira.

However, he did not attempt to do so.

Perhaps it was because there was no value in that to Mayuri or for some other reason that could not be guessed. He did not even turn around to look at Tokinada's corpse or try to capture or kill the assassin that had just killed someone from the Four Great Noble Clans. He simply ignored everything as though he had lost all interest whatsoever and wiped all trace of himself from that place.

A while after that, the still-frightened girl in black ran from the room.

Only the miserable corpse was left behind in the bloodied room.

Tokinada Tsunayashiro.

It might have been by design, or because he truly had just forgotten...

In the end, his life was cut short without leaving any words for Hikone in the final moment.

It was a major disgrace for the head of the Four Great Noble Clans.

Yet he continued to remain true to his soul up until his very last moment.

≡

MUKEN

Not a single color was allowed to grace the prison.

Covered by infinite shadows on a jet-black floor, multiple barriers had been set up to prevent even the faintest of light from reaching

that underground jail. Those who had been given the death penalty but could not be killed due to various circumstances were sealed away in this prison of darkness. In the prison where silence would normally dominate, a man's emotionless voice resounded through the space.

“So one of the flows...has changed.”

Sosuke Aizen.

The prisoner who had spent so much time in that darkness used his incomparable perception to verify that a certain soul had been extinguished in the Soul Society. Aizen, whose body was almost entirely restrained, had guessed that a soul that had a link with a man who was one of his trusted retainers had disappeared, but his face showed no emotion.

Instead, an agreement he had come to with his retainer revived itself in his mind.

≡

THE PAST

“Is there anything you wish for, Kaname? I will give you a token of thanks for following me as my most loyal subject. If there is something that you wish for, you may tell me.”

The memory of Aizen asking that of Kaname Tosen, his loyal retainer, revived itself in his mind.

“If you would allow it...I have one wish.”

“Oh?”

Curious to know what the man in front of him selfishly desired, Aizen lent him an ear, but what came from Kaname Tosen’s lips was something far from a reward.

“What I wish for is...a warning against a sin.”

He urged Tosen to go on with silence.

“If I commit a betrayal and become able to accept the Soul Reapers’ world... If this world, that will never achieve evolution gives me peace...at that moment, please wipe my existence from the world and leave no trace.”

Though his words seemed strange, Aizen understood what Tosen wanted and asked to confirm it, "It is true that if you stop walking your path...you might forgive the Soul Reapers. However, don't you think that you could accept forgiving them?"

"If absoluteness exists, then you are the only one who would be so, Lord Aizen. Even the one who taught me the way of justice was also a part of the world I despise."

"I see, so the very origin of the justice that stirs you is also the linchpin that may destroy your great cause."

Kakyo.

When Aizen recalled the name of the woman who had been Tosen's best friend, Tosen continued, "If I accept the Soul Reapers' world, that means that I have disavowed my cause. At that moment, the things that I have done wouldn't be justice, they would simply turn into slaughter."

Gripping his hand into a fist, Tosen recalled a past he could not wipe away and spoke with effort. "If I did that...then my friend Kakyo's death and way of being would be sullied. Not only would I be standing here after betraying her wishes, backtracking on my cause would be the same as killing her again."

"But don't you think she would have forgiven you, had she still been alive?"

"Yes. She likely would have. That is why, before I succumb to vice within her innate goodness now that she is no longer here, I would like the mercy of disappearing from this world."

"Mercy, is it?"

"If my cause is a fraud, then I absolutely cannot be forgiven! Before my heart is filled with false salvation, please destroy the entirety of my konpaku. That is my wish."

Tosen asked for something not for the sake of his great cause, but to serve his own emotions. Once Aizen understood the significance of that and Tosen's resolve, he uttered a question that he already

anticipated the answer to: "Once I stand atop heaven and create the new world, what do you intend to do?"

"That new world cannot have a prisoner to revenge like me in it. Because of that, after you come to stand atop heaven, I will kill myself to fully purify the world."

"It seems no matter what happens, I will lose one of my trusted retainers."

"I am very sorry. Please forget everything I've just said."

Even he seemed to understand he was a prisoner of his own emotions.

Tosen seemed regretful as he apologized, and Aizen told him, "I don't mind. These are words that originate in your true feelings."

"What doesn't allow me to sever myself from the justice that my friend...Kakyo...extolled, is my own inexperience."

"I don't mind that either. Knowing one's own weakness is the foundation of climbing higher."

Aizen looked at the incomplete Hogyoku he held in his hand as he continued with a daring smile, "Since evolution occasionally requires fear."

Then, Aizen agreed to something that was absolute for the subordinate he trusted.

"Let me promise you that. Before you suffer from the plight of forgiving the Soul Reapers, I will erase you with certainty."

≡

The darkness in Muken quivered faintly.

"Kaname, it seems that those who follow in the footsteps you left behind have walked a path to a rather entertaining place."

After sweeping away the memories of the past, whether Aizen felt something in his chest...

...or whether his heart hadn't been moved in the slightest...

...was unknowable...

The past that had already come to be simply melted into the infinitely spreading darkness.

“Even if they are able to surpass that corpse in the end...

“I will wait with anticipation, looking forward to the time when their journey illuminates my own path.”

FINAL CHAPTER

THE KYOGOKU

WHILE THEY WERE LISTENING to Kisuke Urahara tell them the path to escape the Kyogoku, Hisagi stood in front of Kyoraku. Hikone had lost consciousness at that point and was being treated by Nanao using kaido.

“What a surprise. I had no idea you had learned how to use bankai, Shuhei.”

As though Kyoraku’s words had cut the thread of nerves stringing Hisagi up, he peered away in embarrassment.

“Well...I’m not sure how to say this, but today was the first day I could use it.”

“What? Really? Wait a sec! How did you make it manifest and submit?”

“Apparently, that happened before I realized it...”

Though he hadn’t been worried about it while using his bankai, when Hisagi realized he didn’t fully understand Kazeshini himself, he apologetically reported the truth to Kyoraku.

“Then, basically, you just had to go straight to using it? Well...I’m glad that Captain Zaraki didn’t kill that child and that Karakura Town wasn’t slowly wiped off the map.”

When Kyoraku considered what he saw of Hisagi’s bankai, he questioned something about its ability. “It looked as though that bankai were the culmination of bakudo. Though it seems it’d be difficult to use.”

Hirako, who had been standing off to the side, shrugged as he blurted out, “Better than my bankai, at least. It seems that you’re able to choose who you connect using the chains, at minimum. At worst, if we end up in a fight, Shuhei will be able to drain the spiritual pressure from the enemy, though he’ll sacrifice himself.”

“Uh...but if I don’t have any allies nearby, all I’d be able to do is hope for a draw...”

“Well, I understand the feeling.”

Kyoraku, whose own bankai had an element that required him to share pain, thought over the future suffering that Hisagi would have to endure and silently prayed for him.

Then, as Hisagi worried over Hikone's well-being, Kyoraku told the Soul Reaper something that he felt he needed to say sooner rather than later. "It seems that you've become a candidate for captain as well, I suppose?"

One of the absolute conditions of becoming a captain in the Thirteen Court Guard Companies was the ability to use bankai. Along with the Thirteenth Company, there were currently several openings for the position of captain in many different companies. Given that situation, there was a possibility that Hisagi could become one of those captains...

"About that...could I just continue being the editor-in-chief of the *Seireitei Bulletin* for a while?"

"Hmm...well, we still have to deal with Tokinada, so I'm not sure what will happen to my position or how the Court Guards will fare from here on. But there are many who can use bankai right now, so I suppose it's all right."

"I see... Thank you very much."

"So you're choosing a path in which you can continue to be a reporter."

Hisagi noticed that those words were filled with complex significance.

He glanced at Hikone.

"I decided that I'd show Hikone all kinds of worlds. And it's not just Hikone. I want to expand the world for the readers in the Rukongai and the Seireitei who can't go to other places on their own two feet."

"I don't mind that, but...there may be some things that are better left in the dark."

"So the things that Tokinada said were actually..."

Kyoraku purposefully refused to confirm Hisagi's suspicion. However, when Hisagi looked at Kyoraku with determination in his eyes, Hisagi told him, "Captain General Kyoraku...if you've decided that keeping the truth hidden forever is best for this world...then kill me and leave me behind before we depart this place."

"We can't assume the truth will save the world. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, so I won't do anything specific immediately. I will research it for years or even decades if necessary in order to figure out what happened in the shadows. If I just accepted Tokinada's words without questioning them, I'd be a failure as a journalist."

When he heard that, Kyoraku smiled gently and put a hand on Hisagi's shoulder.

"Be careful. If you decide to delve into the Soul Society's past, there are still many, many more enemies out there. Even if the Kuchiki and Shihoin family heads say that it was wrong, there are a mountain of other relatives that won't allow things to be put right."

Then he looked around at the Soul Reapers, Arrancars, Quincies, and Fullbringers as he gave some advice. "If you plan on fighting the world, make more allies. Just as Ichigo did."

"Like...Kurosaki?"

"At the very least, I intend to be your ally. But just as you yourself said, no need to do anything right away."

Kyoraku thought quietly for some time, then pointed out a concrete time frame.

"Right... At least now there is a possibility that the dregs of Yhwach are still wandering about somewhere in the world. I think it won't be too late to wait and see whether those get up to something wicked." Then he considered the history Tokinada spoke of and said thoughtfully, "No...maybe I can't call it 'wicked' anymore."

"If...if the same thing happens again, I'd definitely fight for the Soul Reapers. But if there's something I can do before that happens, I'd like to increase the number of paths we can take."

What was hidden in Hisagi's words wasn't a reference to the war with the Quincies, but to Kaname Tosen. Kyoraku seemed to realize that and intentionally didn't mention it.

They watched Urahara work at removing the barrier for a while.

Once Urahara had released several barriers, Kyoraku received a communication from his Soul Pager. When Kyoraku realized it was a message from Assistant Captain Okikiba, he took it and spoke with a solemn expression for a while.

Kyoraku hung up, and with a complicated look on his face he informed the Soul Reapers, "They found Tokinada."

A shiver ran through the group as they tensed, but Kyoraku went on, seeming baffled. "I have no idea who did it, but...apparently he has already died."

≡

SEVERAL HOURS LATER,

THE RUKONGAI SHIBA RESIDENCE

They returned to the Shiba residence from the Kyogoku, and those whose paths had temporarily crossed each headed their own way. Hikone was taken to Shino-Seyakuin in order to be put under the care of Seinosuke Yamada, while the Soul Reapers, Arrancars, and Quincies each went home to their own places.

Ginjo and the others who didn't have a specific place to go back to were enjoying Ganju and his sister's alcohol like freeloaders.

"Seriously, what was with that? If it was such a big deal, I shoulda definitely gone too! I would've taken that Tokinada guy and used my skills to give 'im a little bit of *this* and do a little bit of *that*, like *this!*"

"Lacking in vocab, much?"

"What did you say?!"

"Please calm down. The best medicine for appeasing indignation is abandoning oneself to pleasure occasionally."

"I-is it?"

While Giriko soothed Ganju, who was all worked up about what the boy Yukio had muttered while playing his game, Ginjo said to Yukio, "You're heading back to the world of the living, aren't you?"

"Yeah, along with Kisuke Urahara. It's a pain, but Aura asked me to deal with her religious group. Either way, it seemed like she was going to disappear from the world of the living."

"So you've gotta manage a whole religious group. Seems tough being a young president."

"This is easy mode for me. More importantly, have you got anything you want me to tell Riruka or Jackie?"

As he glanced from his game to Ginjo, the man shrugged.

"I haven't. If they're doing well, anything I could say to them would just be tasteless."

"Would it? Then I'll let them know that."

"You're as charming as ever..."

Ignoring Ginjo's exasperation, Yukio simply called out to Tsukishima, "Right, his name was Moeh Shishigawara, right? Looks like he's been visiting your grave or something. Have you got anything to tell him?"

Tsukishima raised his eyebrows slightly and closed his book. "I'm surprised I have a grave...but I haven't got anything specific to say. I'll pray that he forgets us and comes across a new book."

"Moeh Shishigawara...that's the kid with that irritating power, right?"

"Don't look at me like that, Tsukishima. I'm not about to tell anybody to kill him or something."

Ginjo smiled bitterly and started to ask Yukio about the state of the world of the living, but...

"Hey there, could I cut in for a moment?"

Kyoraku, who should have just gone home, was showing his face.

"What? You're still around?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd tell you some things."

"You've got downtime as Captain General?"

"No, no, I'm busy, of course. Especially since I lost a full day today. I'm about to head around to the government office and Nanao's waiting outside right now, so I don't have much time."

"What're you trying to say?"

Ginjo was skeptical as Kyoraku conveyed the message to him: "First, I already mentioned this to Kukaku and Ganju, but...we will be simplifying the means to move between the Seireitei and the Rukongai from now on. Everyone in the Rukongai will be able to come in more freely."

"Haven't got any interest in that."

At Ginjo's quick response, Kyoraku pulled something from his clothes.

"Since you say that, I've got this for you. I went out to get this just now."

"The hell is that?"

It was a book. It seemed to be part of a series and was numbered with a one next to the title.

"It's the adventure Ukitake was writing. I thought you might be interested."

"...What the hell is '*Warning of the Twin Fish!*' supposed to mean? Looks like some kind of romantic drama."

As Ginjo had no idea how to react, Tsukishima said in an indifferent tone, "Oh, I've already read the whole series."

"Seriously? You'll read anything with pages..."

"It's made for kids, but it's pretty entertaining. In the last volume's scene, where a shrine maiden is being saved, I think the personality of the author really shows through."

He was clearly saying that because he knew about the relationship Ginjo had with the author, Ukitake.

Kyoraku was grateful for the help as he cut in with the main topic. "Are you still having reservations about Ukitake?"

"I told you, didn't I? I don't care about what Tokinada did. I'm the guy who became the enemy of Ukitake and the Soul Reapers. What're you trying to ask me to do now?"

Kyoraku scowled slightly as he said, "Well, Ukitake was constantly asking old man Yama and me to overlook your wrongdoings."

"Huh? What? You want me to be thankful to him or something? Don't make me repeat myself. I haven't got any regrets about making you guys my enemy at..."

"That's not what I mean," Kyoraku interrupted. "I'm not talking about your past crimes. I'm talking about if the time came when you would kill Ukitake."

"...What did you say?"

"It seems that Ukitake was prepared to be killed by you. Of course, he was in a position where he needed to protect his company as captain, so I don't think he would have let it happen without a fight, but...he said if something happened between the two of you, he wanted to shoulder all of the responsibility."

Kyoraku righted his hat and slowly continued. "It might be inappropriate of me to tell you this, but I thought it would be okay to talk about it now. Tokinada also said this, but Ukitake was prepared to pursue you as an enemy when he gave the order to surveil you. It doesn't make that part untrue."

Kyoraku remembered his old friend's face as he spoke that unshakable truth.

"It might be unfair of me to say, as someone who simply saw Ukitake while he was regretful... But even though Ukitake might have been involved with the Tsunayashiro family's motives, he wasn't the type of man to use that as an excuse to make himself feel better. That was all I wanted to tell you."

"..."

"Well, I apologize for forcing you to humor my self-indulgence. With that, I suppose I'll be heading out now."

As Kyoraku started to leave, Ginjo, holding a drink, called out.

“So you were saying it’d be easier to get in and out of the Seireitei, weren’t you?”

“Yes, very soon.”

“And even I could go into the Seireitei?”

“Depending on what you were intending to do, you could. What are you planning?”

Kyoraku looked somehow relieved as he waited for Ginjo to speak. Ginjo remained silent for a while and then made an honest inquiry. He asked it in order to draw a distinction with his past, so he could walk new paths.

“Could you tell me where...Ukitake’s grave is?”

≡

Observing this, Kukaku sipped from her cup and murmured to herself, “Heh... Looks like the time for the Soul Society to change has finally come.”

Unnoticed, Kukaku offered up a drink to one who was not there.

“I hope that it’ll be a world you like...Kaien.”

≡

SEVERAL HOURS LATER,

SHINO-SEYAKUIN TREATMENT ROOM

“I’ve been able to preserve Hikone’s life.”

When Hisagi heard Seinosuke Yamada’s words, he smiled in relief.

“I see... Thank you very much.”

“No need to thank me. More importantly, you’re even more severely wounded. Looks like you were reckless when using your zanpaku-to. Your saketsu and hakusui are both worse for the wear.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’ll heal them. It isn’t part of my job to heal anyone except the nobles, but I’ll consider this treatment as a pastime during my break.”

With that remark, Seinosuke nimbly continued to heal Hisagi using kaido. Hisagi inquired meekly, “Um...so, Tokinada Tsunayashiro is...”

"They brought him here, but a group with documents stamped by the Gilded Seal Aristocratic Assembly immediately came to collect him."

Seinosuke's face clouded slightly as he said, "Even I couldn't resuscitate a corpse. Regardless, his konpaku was already in a sorry state due to the effects of using his zanpaku-to. Even if they treat him by turning him into a zombie, I don't think he would retain his sense of self."

"...I see."

Hisagi gripped his hand into a fist, seeming somewhat frustrated as Seinosuke continued, "Hikone should be waking soon. They might commit suicide if you don't let them know gently."

"Oh!"

"Tokinada, the one who was propping up their mind, died. Hikone might be happier dying. Of course, I don't intend to allow them to die. Even if they said they wanted to, I would make them live, even by force. Giving up is not an option."

Hisagi put on a strained smile and shook his head.

"Hikone is...okay. I think they've developed something new to support them."

Seinosuke looked at Hisagi, who was thinking of Aura as he spoke.

"I see...in that case, I will leave it to you to tell them. I won't ask you to do it immediately though. You may tell them when you feel the time is right."

At first it seemed as though Seinosuke were washing his hands of the responsibility, but when he looked into Seinosuke's eyes, Hisagi understood.

Seinosuke had decided that Hikone should hear it from Hisagi himself, because that was most likely to result in Hikone staying alive.

"It seems that I really don't have a human heart. I'm not suited for such things. Hanataro does have that... It is a talent he has that I am lacking."

Seinosuke let a spiteful smile come over his face.

“If it is a Soul Reaper’s work to control life, then isn’t giving others the will to live part of your role?”

≡

DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

“I wonder why it is that you didn’t secure this Hikone in the Kyogoku? To think you would allow the subject to be given over to Shino-Seyakuin under your very noses—what a useless bunch you are. If you think you can wander the world doing just what is asked of you, then I have a wake-up call for your future as corpses.”

As Mayuri grumbled, Cirucci complained back, “But you electrocute us whenever we do anything on our ow...AGH AGH AGH AGH!”

“Looks like you understand that very well. However, a Corpse Unit that can truly do their work well would take that electrical current, use it to accelerate their neurotransmitters, and finish up their work more efficiently.”

“What you’re saying is absurd—GAAAAAAAH?!”

After Dordoni and the others shrieked for some time, Mayuri cut the electric current and looked over the data collected on Tokinada and Hikone, nodding in satisfaction.

“Well, anyway, you did as you were instructed. As a reward, I will increase your free time by two thousand seven hundred seconds per day. Well then, be sure to show your gratitude.”

Behind Mayuri, who went right back to his work, Luppi sighed as though he were exhausted and, with a newly lively expression, said, “Well, all right. Once I’m free, that’s when I’ll bring Grimmjow to his end.”

“You haven’t given up yet?”

“All Grimmjow promised to the Captain General here was that he wouldn’t let his fight with Ichigo Kurosaki get in the Soul Reapers’ way, right? In that case, I’m not a Soul Reaper, so while they’re in the middle of their fight I could come in from the side and...”

“Stop right there! What would I do if you killed that orange-haired niño?!”

While Dordoni and Luppi argued, Chuhlhourne smiled as if taking another path.

“Ha ha... Rivalry is a beautiful thing. Yes, though Halibel and Nelliel are both half a step stronger than me, when it comes to beauty, I have a full step lead...and that perfect balance makes me even stronger! And more beautiful! And more radiant!”

Najahkoop watched them from afar and shook his head.

“So, in the end, I’m the only Quincy left here. Luck seriously is not on my side.”

When Mayuri heard these complaints, he responded, “I made it seem as though I’d released them. Naturally, I’ve put a collar on them. Though I’ll be using you as a stopgap until the time comes when I call them back.”

Once Luppi and the others heard that, they again started to complain to Mayuri.

“Then why us?!”

“What? There’s no need to worry. You’re already dead, so it’s not as though you’d die from overwork.”

“That’s not the issue!”

≡

A CERTAIN PLACE IN THE WORLD OF THE LIVING

As the Corpse Unit was sighing in the Soul Society, there was a moving corpse crying out in the world of the living as well.

“Seriously! I can’t believe two of you got captured because you weren’t paying attention! Looks like I’ve really got to keep levelheaded as your leader!” Bambietta Basterbine, whose skin was the same as always, but whose eyes had a strange liveliness to them, declared sonorously.

“Hey...what’s up with that?”

When Candice looked at Giselle with reproach, the zombie-tamer Quincy averted her eyes and spouted out excuses. “Umm, she ended

up getting really beat up by that Tokinada guy, so I healed her, right? And I just accidentally gave her too much blood, I think?"

Candice and Meninas, who had superficially been released from the Corpse Unit but still contained tracking bacteria within them, apparently had some sort of communications equipment installed in their konpaku itself. It was likely that there were other apparatuses that had been inserted into their bodies. Though they had no idea when they would compulsorily be called back, for the time being, they had left with free will, which was a better result than Liltotto was expecting.

"Well, we'll probably have a chance to disable those things at some point. Anyway, let's just be thankful we survived."

They presently weren't in their Quincy clothes, but were instead wearing their personal clothing and were at a cafe in a certain country. Though the zombielike color of Bambietta's complexion garnered an occasional stare, they blended in like normal townspeople otherwise.

Bambietta, who was excited about having temporarily recovered her cognitive functions, was letting her mouth run without reading the mood. "Uhh...so ever since I fought that doggy and then he stopped being a doggy...what happened after that again? Ugh...my head... Well, it doesn't matter! Anyway, if you're saying his majesty is gone, then I've just got to succeed him in his place! I'm the queen for now, so how about we blast one of the countries around here and take over?"

A part of her brain was still zombified, so Bambietta's memories and actions went off the rails occasionally.

"You think we're terrorists or something? Sounds like a pain. If she keeps this up, she's probably going to start offing hot guys again, eh?"

"We'll be in trouble if she causes a commotion..."

"Ah well, guess I'll have to just beat her up to get rid of some of that blood."

"I think she'll go back to normal soon even if you don't."
As they chattered on, just as Giselle had predicted, the spirit in Bambietta's eyes started to wane.

"Huh...? I...what? Uh-huh...cake...is so good."
Seeing Bambietta's childlike smile, the Quincies looked at each other and sighed dramatically. Then, Liltotto half muttered as she ate her cake, "Well, we've got to think about what we're going to do too."

Giselle asked, "You want to go to Hueco Mundo again or something?"

Liltotto shook her head.
"Hollows aside, the Arrancars really are a pain to work with."
"Most importantly, Hueco Mundo hasn't got a ton of grub..."

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HUECO MUNDO

Looking at the gigantic building halfway buried in the sand, Aura realized that she had collapsed on top of the soft and cool sands herself.

It was likely somewhere in Hueco Mundo.
Why was she in Hueco Mundo? As she wondered that, Aura confirmed that she was still conscious. She had no memories from after she drove the castle in the sky into the garganta. She had thought she would simply continue to wander within the endless expanse of the garganta and that her reishi itself would simply rot away, but for some reason she was stretched out on this sand.

However, she had done what she needed. She realized that this time, she had lost everything. She might have developed an attachment. But she didn't regret that.

It was more likely that Hikone's world would expand if they were raised by those Soul Reapers, rather than by her. Regardless, she didn't have the strength to stand up. If her blood and reishi continued to flow out of her, she would probably become one with the sand.

Even as Aura thought that, she realized that the pain had disappeared. When she slowly raised her face, she realized her wounds had closed.

Though she was bewildered, a young woman right next to her spoke. "Oh...so you've woken, then?"

An Arrancar woman was standing there with unbelievably kind eyes. There was a thin thread extending from the woman's hand sewing together the wound in Aura's side, all the way down to the delicate blood vessels and nerves.

She heard another voice from a spot slightly further away. "Oh, can you get up already? You're amazing, Roka. I thought she was a goner..."

"You're the one...who was in the Kyogoku..."

"Yes, I'm Nelliel. And she's Halibel, over there."

When Aura looked over, she met eyes with an Arrancar who was leaning on the rubble a slight distance away. Though the woman looked at Aura for a while, as though the Arrancar had lost interest, she turned her eyes to the partially destroyed castle.

"She's just being bashful. Halibel is instinctively kind to children and people who like children."

When Aura looked, the Arrancar called Halibel was looking at a crowd of children—or to be more accurate, Arrancars in the shape of children. The children were playing hide-and-seek in the ruins of the floating castle, jumping around all over the place and releasing Ceros and Baras at each other.

"It seems that the castle you brought here has become the playground for Picaro's child. Though it does not quite match Hueco Mundo, I believe it will become covered in dust and fit in very soon."

"Why am I...here?"

"I brought you here. It wasn't as though I could have left you in the garganta like that, right?"

When Nelliel said that, Aura's eyes widened.

"You...saved me?"

“Ahh...half saved.”

“Half?”

“You might not have noticed...but you can’t exist as a human in the world of the living anymore...”

When she heard that, Aura understood what it meant.

As a human, she had died in the garganta.

“Since your konpaku was pretty beat up, I called Roka and had her treat you as soon as possible. The air here is concentrated with reishi, so your recovery is going pretty quickly because of her powers, right?”

“Why would you do so much for me?”

“Huh? Well, if we left you, even your konpaku probably would have disappeared.”

As though she were an entirely different person from when she had been battling Ikomikidomoe, Nelliel spoke in a mellow tone.

When Aura heard the woman’s words, her eyes opened wide again. She was bewildered when faced with the Arrancar’s honest goodwill.

Looking at her, Nelliel made a mistaken assumption and asked, “Are you hungry?” and pulled Aura into a building to the side.

“Pesche! Dondochakka! Let’s have our meal! And since they’re already here, how about we call Halibel and Roka over too?”

When the Arrancars in front of her began to prepare a meal before she had a chance to protest, Aura lost her opportunity to turn them down and was forced to sit.

“Umm, and this is...”

“It’s a meal made from Hueco Mundo’s lizards and characteristic snow herbs. Don’t worry, it’s not a person’s konpaku or anything.”

A meal.

When she saw the unfamiliar ingredients, a memory from Aura’s youth revived in her head.

She recalled the rotten foods she had eaten when she first left the glass case and had to steel herself as she brought the food to her

mouth. Then, against her expectations, the taste was rich and colorful.

“...It’s...very good.”

Aura expressed her sensation with wonder, and Nelliel broke into an innocent smile, almost like a child’s.

As they continued with their meal, Nelliel asked Aura what she would do now.

“What do you want to do next? If you want to move on properly, I can introduce you to Ichigo.”

“No...I have no place to go. I’m not sure if I have the right to go through konso.”

“Really? Then do you want to rest here until you figure out what you want to do? Right. I’ve been interested in learning more about the palate and cuisine of humans in the world of the living! So why don’t you help out with our meals here?”

Nelliel spoke as though she had come upon a truly good idea, and Aura felt a swelling sensation.

I thought I wouldn’t be able to see Hikone, but...

I wonder what I should do.

Since she had lost her kishi body, there was no point in going back to the world of the living in order to continue serving as the leader of her religious group. She had left the rest to Yukio and would just cause confusion by going back.

As Aura pondered what to do, Nelliel asked her, “Hey, what about you? Do you like cooking? I do. I’d like Ichigo and his friends in the world of the living to eventually try out these meals!”

She would have the humans from the world of the living eat the cuisine of this land. Though it sounded absurd, it made Aura pursue a very specific line of thought.

Someday, after Hisagi and the rest spread out across the world of the Soul Society in front of them...

...eventually, Hikone might once again come to this land.

If that happened, wasn't it likely that Hikone would try the food here as well?

If she were allowed to, she might even develop the courage to visit them in the Soul Society from here.

If she just had a reason—one little reason that would give her a slight push...

I'll see Hikone again.

As she savored the food Nelliel and the others treated her to, Aura realized she had started to cry.

"What's wrong? Were you so hungry that you're crying?"

"No, Lady Nelliel. She must just be grateful for the delicious dessert I made!"

"Or she might've just burst out crying because of how horrible it tasted!"

"No...it's very good." While savoring the meal, Aura answered the earlier question. "I love...food."

There was just one thought that had been conjured in her mind. It was a simple wish to someday feed Hikone this meal herself. In just the same way that her father had fed her when she was young.

"I love eating it... And I'm sure in the future...I'll love making these meals too."

As she cried, she realized she was smiling.

Then, after her modest exchange with Nelliel, she decided in her heart that she would live alone in a corner of Hueco Mundo.

She dreamed of Hikone at some future time breaking out into such a smile.

"What? It wasn't an enemy? Lame."

When Grimmjow saw Aura and Nelliel becoming acquainted with each other, he looked bored and stared out over the desert from on top of the rubble.

Halibel, who had finished her meal with Nelliel and the others, came to stand behind Grimmjow and said, "You're not going to show your face in there?"

“I’ve got no interest in making friends.”

When he answered, somewhere in his lost soul—in his Hollow hole—something burned and seethed.

Though he had finally gotten to fight an opponent that was a true challenge for him, the fact that he had done it with others and that he had been beaten by Tokinada right after was a hard pill to swallow.

“I’ve got to settle things with the blockhead Luppi too.”

In order to make sure he never fell behind a second time, Grimmjow imagined his foe and smiled boldly. He didn’t think only of Luppi, but also recalled the face of the orange-haired boy he had appraised as an enemy.

“But he didn’t come out even after we made that huge commotion...”

“That Kurosaki better not’ve gone soft because of the peace.”

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THE NEXT DAY, THE SOUL SOCIETY

“Peace is...pretty nice.”

Hirako made that very out-of-character comment while munching on a rice cracker. Momo Hinamori looked at him and tilted her head, asking, “Umm...so in the end, what happened to the Arrancars in the Rukongai?”

“Right...lots of stuff happened.”

“Lots of stuff? So you drove them back without any problems?”

“When I say lots of stuff, I mean there was lots of stuff. Everything’s been settled just fine, so don’t worry about it.”

The series of events from the day before was being treated as classified. Though he had been told he could tell Hinamori some details of how the situation came to be, Hirako found it tedious to figure out how much to tell her, so he decided to handle it however he wanted.

“Ahh...”

Though many questions came to her mind, Hinamori was accepting. Because of that, Hirako decided to listen to some jazz over the Soul Pager that was equipped with music playback features, but...

The moment he put the earphones on, a voice called out to him from behind. "Hey, you baldy, Shinji!"

When he turned around, Hiyori Sarugaki, who should have been in the world of the living, was standing there.

"What? Oh, it's just you, Hiyori. What're you doing here? Come to think of it, I heard you started a part-time job in the world of the living. What kind of goofball situation would lead to tha...OOF?!"

Hirako cried out in agony after taking a kick right between the legs.

"*Gah...guh...*what do you think you're doing?! That's not the kind of greeting you give someone you haven't seen in forever!"

"Shuddup! Apparently you told an assistant captain named Hisagi to *tease* me. And that guy went and did it! So how're you gonna settle this, huh?"

"Th-that guy... He actually went through with it?! Wow, he really takes things seriously!"

Hiyori's hair stood on end out of rage and she half smiled as she said to him, "Huh! So in other words, you actually *did* order that guy to do it, you baldy!"

"Wait a sec...!"

"They're sure noisy."

Kenpachi Zaraki watched from afar as Hinamori desperately tried to stop the fight between Hirako and Hiyori, then he asked Madarame and Yumichika behind him, "Hey, where's Hisagi?"

"Assistant Captain Hisagi is in the world of the living."

"Yeah, he headed over to finish his interview with Urahara."

At Yumichika's and Madarame's responses, Kenpachi clucked his tongue as though he were disappointed. "Tsk...ah well. That guy's

bankai caught my eye a little, so I wanted to try fighting him...but guess I'll wait until tomorrow."

Kenpachi kept walking, and behind his back Madarame and Yumichika looked at each other.

"Well, guess that's how it is. The captain really would be interested in that."

"Hisagi...I think you're going to be in hot water for a while..."

Imagining Hisagi's future, the two of them each clasped their hands together, offering prayers for Hisagi, who was currently in the world of the living.

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THE WORLD OF THE LIVING, URAHARA SHOTEN

"Yes, so that's it for the interview. Once again...thank you for everything."

Completely unaware of the fact that Madarame and Yumichika were pitying him from afar, Hisagi finished the interview and started to make preparations to return to the Soul Society.

In the end, because the plans for an article about Tokinada assuming office had fizzled, he had started to work toward putting together the reissue. He had also decided to go ahead with plans to interview Urahara and move forward with a special project titled *Be Amazed! The Seven Great Mysteries of Urahara Shop!*

The barrier around Karakura Town had disappeared, and the people Aura had been controlling had a confused recollection of what had happened, but were safely released. The religious organization was likely having a rough time due to Aura's disappearance, but Yukio said he would fix that up, so all they could do was believe him.

"Thanks for your hard work. I'm sure things have been a real hassle with everything that happened yesterday. How are your wounds?"

In response to Urahara, Hisagi gave a fist pump as he answered, "Yes! When I took Hikone over there the director took a look at me, so I think I'm good as new now."

"Well, that's Mr. Seinosuke for you. Is he not getting flak for partnering with Tokinada Tsunayashiro, then?"

"No, the aristocrats made an appeal for him. But even now I really can't tell if he's a good person or a bad person."

Though Hisagi had complex emotions about it, he recalled what Tokinada had said and once again looked Urahara in the face.

Internally, Hisagi reached a conclusion.

It was about why Kisuke Urahara had made a Hogyoku in order to strengthen the limits of a konpaku...

So had he wanted to create a konpaku that was as powerful as the Reio's?

Or had he been trying to make it so any of the Soul Reapers could have the same power as the Reio, so they could all use their powers to gradually support the foundation of this world?

He was likely doing it so that he could release the Reio from his eternal sacrifice.

Hisagi, having made this assumption, said to Urahara respectfully, "This is separate from the interview, but...to me, you're definitely a hero."

"What? That was sudden. You can't use flattery to get me to extend the payment date on your guitar loan."

"I really will pay you back for that! I think..." Hisagi said without much confidence.

Two Soul Reapers who had appeared at Urahara Shoten's entrance, Shino Madarame and Ryunosuke Yuki, called out to him. "Assistant Captain Hisagi! You really did save the town! I knew you would!"

"Oh...no, I didn't really save it..."

"I'm so glad that weird wall is gone! Let's pray that we can ride the trains free from harm from now on!"

“The trains?”

After a brief conversation with the Soul Reapers of Karakura Town who had come to greet him, Hisagi gave the two Soul Reapers a thumbs-up and told them, “It’s your turn to save the town next!” Then he was teased by Urahara for his self-satisfied grin, so much so that his whole body was blushing deep red by the time he disappeared through the Senkaimon.

A little while after Hisagi left, Yoruichi wound around Urahara’s feet in her black cat form and spoke to him. “Are you sure about this? Do you really think we can leave Shuhei Hisagi be?”

“Why would we have to do anything to him?”

“He’s supposed to be a ‘journalist,’ isn’t he? Don’t you think he stepped too far into the Soul Society’s...or, actually, into your own internal workings? I thought you’d do something to keep him quiet.”

“All this talk about shutting people up really isn’t like you, Ms. Yoruichi,” Urahara said in exasperation as the black cat leapt gracefully onto the shop’s shelves.

“Nonsense. I’m not saying you should kill him, as Tokinada would. You could’ve used the Kikanshinki Deluxe to wipe his memory or something.”

“That’s something you’re supposed to use on bodies made of kishi, so you know it would only work on humans of the living world.”

“I’m just saying, it’s not as though you couldn’t tamper with a Soul Reaper’s memory.”

Yoruichi spoke as though she were testing Urahara. The man sighed slightly and then responded with a serious expression, “Mr. Hisagi probably thinks that I created the Hogyoku for the Reio’s sake.”

“That’s not necessarily mistaken, though, right?”

“You’re wrong. Entirely wrong. It’s the opposite.”

There was both regret and self-derision in his words as Urahara looked back at his own past. “All I wanted to do was create something new. The goal for doing so was secondary. I just wanted

to open a new door. I used the Reio as an excuse to open the lock to that door. I simply followed my own desires... Fundamentally, I am no different from Mr. Kurotsuchi and how he sacrifices so many in order to fulfill his craving for research."

"Kisuke, you..."

"But Ms. Hiyori did see through me. That's why, to take a neutral position...well to be accurate, it's not neutral, but I decided to entrust some matters to a very *Soul Reaper-like* Soul Reaper." His features softened then as he spoke about Hisagi. "When the time comes that I really do become someone who could be called a villain, it would be best to leave behind someone who can definitively determine that I've sinned, right? I'm sure that Mr. Hisagi, who saw how Mr. Tosen was and saw how he left, well, he would do that. Of course, Mr. Kurosaki or Ms. Kuchiki would work as well."

Yoruichi jumped onto Urahara's shoulder and protested close enough that she could have bitten his ear. "Are you saying I'm not cut out for that job?"

"No, no, but you'd be on my side no matter what anyone says, right? You're not impartial."

Urahara smiled, and Yoruichi acted exasperated, with her tail hanging down.

"I don't even know where to start with that pretentious attitude you've got."

"Also...if you thought I really crossed a line, you'd stop me even if you had to kick me, Ms. Yoruichi."

"I'm telling you to stop being conceited. As if I'd stop at kicking you. I'd snap your neck to stop you."

"You're so severe."

Urahara, who had returned to his usual demeanor, righted his hat as he gripped his cane and said to Yoruichi, "Well, let's head off. Mr. Kurosaki and his friends might really be in hot water."

Ichigo and his friends were in western Japan and had been caught up in some trouble. Though it wasn't particularly urgent at the

moment, if this were part of Tokinada's strategy, there was a high possibility that it could turn into a thorny situation. Anticipating that, Urahara closed his store and planned to open an "Urahara Shoten Western Japan Branch" for the next few days.

"Really, you are such a busy man. Don't you think you're coddling Ichigo?"

"A small-town candy shop is supposed to coddle the kids."

As he looked at Tessai, Jintaro, and Ururu, who were heaping together swim rings, beach parasols, and various other items outside, Urahara started on the path ahead of him in order to open the next door.

"Though I think Mr. Kurosaki is a bit too reliable to call a kid at this point."

He would likely continue on to open another new door that day.

He would head on to worlds through doors yet unseen, carrying both fear and hope.

BONUS CHAPTER

A DECADE LATER, THE SOUL SOCIETY “THAT’S VERY ADMIRABLE...”

It was the day of Rukia Kuchiki's installation ceremony as the new captain of the Thirteenth Company. Running along the main street that led to the First Company barracks, Tenth Company Captain Toshiro Hitsugaya murmured those words. Hitsugaya, who had just caught sight of Iba going through his captain's training, unintentionally complimented Iba's spirit not to skip out on his training.

“That could be what it takes to be a captain... Wish a certain somebody could hear that.”

His assistant captain, Rangiku Matsumoto, averted her eyes and smiled.

“Hmm? Who could that be? Could it be Shuhei?”

Someone from another company who was running just ahead of them heard those words and said, “Yeah. Pay attention, Shuhei.”

“I can't let that slide, Rangiku!”

The one who had heard Kensei Muguruma and spoken up was none other than Assistant Captain Shuhei Hisagi.

“For your information, your captain agrees with us.”

Finding himself on the receiving end of Rangiku's teasing, Hisagi pointed at himself and objected, full of self-confidence, “I'll have you know... I've already mastered my bankai!”

Stop being so proud of your own bankai.

Muguruma thought that retort internally, but Rangiku and Hitsugaya were already pummeling him with harsher jabs.

“Well, I haven't seen it yet.”

“Neither have I.”

“This some kind of bankai con?”

The rumor that Hisagi had acquired bankai had certainly spread.

Because Kenpachi had been trying to get Hisagi to have a duel with him by commanding, “Do your bankai,” it had spread to the other Soul Reapers.

However, for better or worse, the actual substance of the bankai hadn’t spread around, and because the incident at the Kyogoku was classified and they had no idea when he had gotten his bankai, the circumstances remained mysteries to the general soldiers.

Muguruma added, “I haven’t seen it either.”

“What?! I know you’ve seen it, Captain!!”

Hisagi was near tears as he desperately appealed to them.
“Wh...what am I supposed to do?! I haven’t had the chance to use it since that...”

Though Hisagi and Rangiku continued with their quarrel, Hitsugaya was serene as he brought the conversation about Hisagi’s bankai to a close. “Well...the fact that he hasn’t had to use it for ten years is a good thing.”

Thinking of the Quincy war a decade ago and a few incidents since then, he celebrated the world that they had enjoyed since.

“It means for ten years we’ve maintained peace.”

Hitsugaya and Rangiku had been with Abarai and the Kuchiki siblings at the same place Ichigo Kurosaki was during the Kyogoku incident, so they knew nothing about it. However, Hitsugaya might have guessed at something. Though at first glance, Hisagi seemed the same as usual, Hitsugaya had sensed a change in him from a decade ago, which made the captain think that the assistant captain really could use bankai as he claimed.

When Hisagi heard Hitsugaya say “ten years” ago, he remembered a certain Soul Reaper.

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**ONE YEAR AGO, THE RUKONGAI,
WEST SIXTY-FOUR DISTRICT, SABITSURA**

The place was a valley settlement that had been part of the Eleventh Company’s jurisdiction. However, at the moment the Eleventh

Company soldiers, not to mention Rukongai residents, didn't dare approach it. As a result of the great war of ten years ago, when the konpaku balance of the three worlds needed to be adjusted, it was where the Twelfth Company had taken emergency measures and erased the residents of the sector. Though that itself was a secret, no one attempted to approach a village where all the residents had disappeared and no new residents came to attempt to appropriate the place, so the settlement became a ghost town.

However, in a charcoal-maker's hut deep in the mountains of that district, someone was eking out a living for themselves.

Shuhei, who stood in front of the hut, called out to that person.
"Yo."

The person in the hut—Hikone Ubuginu—heard Hisagi's voice and replied with the same innocent smile as in the past. "Oh...Mr. Hisagi, you came by!"

After some adjustments had been made at the Shino-Seyakuin, and Hikone was able to live on their own, they left the Seireitei to live in a corner of a desolate part of the Rukongai.

Though Hisagi had thought they could enter Shinorei-jutsuin and take the path to becoming a Soul Reaper, not enough time had passed for them to accept someone who had once been a definitive enemy. Because the incident itself was treated as classified, they had disregarded any wrongdoing, but there was still a high possibility that Hikone wouldn't be accepted by the nobility of the Seireitei. Though the Seireitei's sensibilities were certainly changing, the Court Guards were still on high alert.

And, most importantly, Hikone themselves had decided to leave the Seireitei of their own volition.

"I understand now. Until I decided to leave the Seireitei, Mr. Hisagi, Mr. Kyoraku, and Mr. Seinosuke's brother Mr. Hanataro...taught me many things. Now even I can understand what kind of person Lord Tokinada was. But I can't hate Lord Tokinada. I can't scorn him. Lord Tokinada was the one who gave me a reason to live. Because I...was

really happy during that time. I think...a Soul Reaper like that couldn't exist within the Court Guards. I want to live alone for a while if I can. Yes...I am very scared. But, Mr. Hisagi, you were the one to teach me that's what it means to live!"

When Hisagi recalled Hikone, whose anxiety and fear were visible within their innocent smile, he once again asked them, "Did you find anything? Something you want to do in the future?"

"Yes, sir! I think...I want to become stronger."

Since Ikomikidomoe had stolen their power, Hikone's spiritual pressure had decreased significantly. Regardless of that, they had spiritual pressure that was much higher than normal Soul Reapers. But they had relinquished Ikomikidomoe to Squad Zero, and their battle power had dropped significantly compared to when they were in their prime.

"Oh, and what are you going to do after you become strong?"

Hisagi asked as though testing them, and Hikone looked straight at him and answered, "I'm going to find Ms. Aura... I'm going to find my mother."

When he heard Hikone say that clearly, of their own volition, Hisagi had complex feelings. Though he didn't know whether Aura was alive, he thought it likely that she wasn't in the Soul Society. He hadn't heard anything about her konpaku reaching the Soul Society, either.

Since Hikone was not formally a Soul Reaper and had lost Ikomikidomoe, who could use gargantas, it wouldn't be easy for Hikone to leave the Soul Society. Despite that, seeing Hikone had found a reason to live as a Soul Reaper, Hisagi believed that Hikone's future would be bright.

"Right...I'll try to help as much as I can when the time comes."

Recalling Tosen and Kanisawa, those who had left him in the past, Hisagi carried the fear of losing them in his heart as he said to Hikone...

“I’ve also...decided that I’m going to find the ‘path of least bloodshed’ in my own way.”

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As he recalled that exchange with Hikone, Hisagi decided anew that he would not let the last ten years of peace go to waste. In order to believe that Hikone and the Soul Reapers’ future in turn would be bright, he decided he would do what he needed to as the editor-in-chief of the *Seireitei Bulletin*.

When Rangiku saw Hisagi with a fearless smile on his face, she said, “Come to think of it...Shuhei, you’ve been going out to the Rukongai more often these past ten years, haven’t you?”

“Uh...yeah, well, I started connecting with more people through my interviews.”

It wasn’t just Hikone. He still went to see Ginjo and the others, and Hisagi was secretly collecting information about the Tsunayashiro family’s actions as well. Though many things had become uncertain because of Tokinada’s death, he wanted at least to expose their past evil deeds. He’d been battling the influence of a faction of aristocrats while continuing to interview those who were peripheral to the Tsunayashiro family.

“Yeah, because this guy’s a ‘journalist.’ His work is well known among some people. Plus, he’s been looking after a kid in the Rukongai.”

Muguruma phrased his responses in a way that wasn’t lying.

“A child?”

“Yeah, going from a brat who was once reduced to tears after a Hollow attack to someone who helps children is nothing to scoff at. But he’s still got a long way to go as far as experience is concerned.”

Muguruma shrugged and Rangiku listened to him, tilting her head quizzically.

“Hmm...I can’t see any kid becoming attached to a face like Hisagi’s...”

“Well I’m sorry for having such a scary face!”

Ignoring Hisagi's complaint, Rangiku thought for a while, but as soon as they got into the First Company barracks, she lifted her head up and pointed at Hisagi as she yelled, "...Is it yours?!"

"No!! Why would you think that?!"

Muguruma responded, seeming exasperated, "Like I said, you seem like you'd be the most likely to be seduced."

"Captain!! You're bringing up something from a decade ago now?!"

It was a lighthearted conversation they were able to have specifically because of the peace they had won, and thus they continued to live their days.

They were Soul Reapers.



They ruled over life and death and were also those who walked the path in the space between life and death.

They feared death, feared life, and clad themselves in all manner of dread.

However, those who live as Soul Reapers can't fear their own world that they bear.

If so, accompanied by the fear of all their days until the last, they would have to sweep away the fears of the next day to reach the world that lay ahead.

And the wind once again circulates through the world.

THE END

AFTERWORD

POSTSCRIPT: TITE KUBO

“ACTUALLY, HISAGI KIND OF SEEMS LIKE main character material...”

That was a discovery we made when Narita told me he wanted me to “write Hisagi as a main character.”

Though he’s dashing, he’s a character you can fiddle with.

Though the people he adores won’t pay him any mind, others treat him well.

Though he was a crybaby once, he was saved by a hero and decided to take the same road.

Once he met his teacher, he faced his weakness and became stronger.

Eventually, he has to confront his own teacher who strayed onto the wrong path.

Though I knew that was the kind of character Hisagi was, when I heard Narita’s proposal, it was the first time I recognized that he was “main character material.”

This work is mapped out to be the final novelization of BLEACH, and it is a grand work that is supported by Narita’s usual high attention to detail in his reading and, as ever, by his extreme enthusiasm.

Narita’s ability to differentiate between many different characters all in one work and in written form, and his talent for knowing the difference between many different characters’ charms in even his own work, all add up to a hardcore intention to serve the readers so they enjoy it.

Hisagi’s and Hirako’s bankai, which ended up not getting time to shine in the original work, also are now able to play a role thanks to Narita, which has me delighted.

Hisagi!!! Good for you!!! You got to have a big part!!!

TITE KUBO

POSTSCRIPT: NARITA RYOHO

“I plan on ending BLEACH’s serialization in one or two years.”

When was it that I first heard that from Tite Kubo's mouth? My reaction upon hearing that was quite blunt.

"Ha ha ha, great joke."

But eventually, one day...

The time for the end of BLEACH arrived.

According to what I heard from the editorial department, when they received a formal intention from Kubo to end the BLEACH serialization in a year's time, apparently the mood felt solemn, as though an era were ending.

However, I am truly grateful that at the same time he reached out to Matsubara and me about his passionate desire and important plans to create a last novelization to add a flourish to his fifteen-year story!

When Matsubara and I met Kubo directly in order to prepare for the novels, we asked him rapid-fire questions about the mysteries remaining in BLEACH's world: "What about that?! What happened in that part?!" "What about that character's past?!" When we heard Kubo's responses, I was blown away by his many charming creations.

"Wh-why didn't you include the past of the Reio and the aristocrats and the underside of the world in the original story?!"

When I asked him that, he gave me a clear answer that I couldn't disagree with: "This is a story about Ichigo and the Soul Reapers' battle, so I didn't want to muddy the story's focus by taking it away from that."

Regardless of the past, Ichigo and the other Soul Reapers were fighting in order to stay true to their souls. If the story's focus were shifted away from that, then it would no longer be a part of BLEACH's original narrative.

However, though he had purposefully not written it as part of the original story, when I heard about the many incredibly fascinating backstories he had, I automatically asked him, "In that case, may I divulge those things you've established as part of my novelization?"

I was sure that would cause him to angrily respond, “Did you even hear what I said?”

However, rather than being angry, Kubo was kind enough to give me even more intricate details about what he had created and gave me a lot of advice about a new character that would need to be created.

Then, as a result of the conversation about which character, who wasn’t Ichigo and who would preferably be part of the Soul Reapers themselves, could fight against that malicious head of the Four Great Noble Clans, we chose Shuhei Hisagi as the main character.

When Kubo first looked over my plot, he deliberated carefully about the many BLEACH fans, asking, “But will writing this much of it down take away from the readers the fun of imagining the underside of the story?”

Regardless of that, I unreasonably said, “Yes, that might end up being the case, but even if the ability to imagine it is taken from the readers, I would like to tell the story of the past the Soul Reapers stand upon and how they continue their path going forward. Please let me write it,” and he kindly allowed me to write it.

In other words, all of this was my own self-indulgence.

All I can do is convey my gratefulness that Kubo allowed me this indulgence.

If there are any readers who say, “I can’t believe you did something so unnecessary! You stole the fun of imagining Hirako’s and Hisagi’s bankai and also the secrets behind the Reio!” I really do not have any excuses.

As far as that is concerned, all I can do is offer my apologies—I am truly sorry...!

However, I was unable to exhaustively tell the full tale of BLEACH’s vast world in these three volumes.

So if, when it comes to the “hearsay” that I wrote from the perspective of the Osho and Tokinada, you were able to spread the wings of your imagination and felt that there was possibly more to

the story, or possibly not, and it continued to fit the aesthetics of the BLEACH world, then...

...as a spinoff novelization author and also a fan of the original work, there is nothing that would make me happier.

I am genuinely grateful for those of you who followed this twelve hundred-plus-page story from the first volume to the very end!

By the way, after Matsubara and I heard the story of how Kisuke Urahara and Yoruichi Shihoin met, both of us said the same thing immediately.

“You have to draw that with your own hand as a manga, Kubo!” Or “Really, I’d like to read that as a manga!”

Those fascinating characters as well as a story hidden within the world...

I do not know if the day will come when that will be created in some form, but as a fan, I will pray that the BLEACH story will continue to expand.

To all those who followed along up until this point, and to the editorial department, especially Rokugo, whom I troubled with a several month-long hospitalization as well as several other issues, and to Makoto Matsubara who wrote about an aspect of the story I was not able to as part of the last novelizations...

And also to Tite Kubo, who drew and spread a vast, magnificent world before us, and to the BLEACH opus itself...

Thank you so very much!

October, 2018 while playing *BLEACH: Brave Souls*,
RYOHGO NARITA

A note from the creator

TITE KUBO

BLEACH original creator.

A mangaka who got a dog for the first time at the beginning of spring.

A man who hadn't had any interest in animals whatsoever and had once thought, "Why do people with pets have phones filled with pictures of their pets and want to show off those pictures at every possible opportunity?" until he also got a pet for the first time and immediately ended up with a phone full of photos of his pet and spends his days battling the desire to show off those pictures to other people and has an iron will that stops that desire.

Dogs are great!!

A note from the author

RYOHGO NARITA

BLEACH novelization author number two.

A simple novelist who loves videos of animals and is easily healed by watching footage of hedgehogs and such.

A snake-loving man who would love wrapping pythons around his neck at the zoo and always wanted to get a pet snake someday, but never had the confidence to care for living animals to begin with and has the will of tofu.

Snakes are great!!